System

Issue No. 18 – £24

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shot by Michael Bailey Gates at Le Progrès.
1 Rue du Bretagne, Paris 3ème, 29th July 2021

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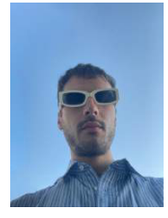
Esther and Gaia

Apologies, our graphic designer was on vacation.



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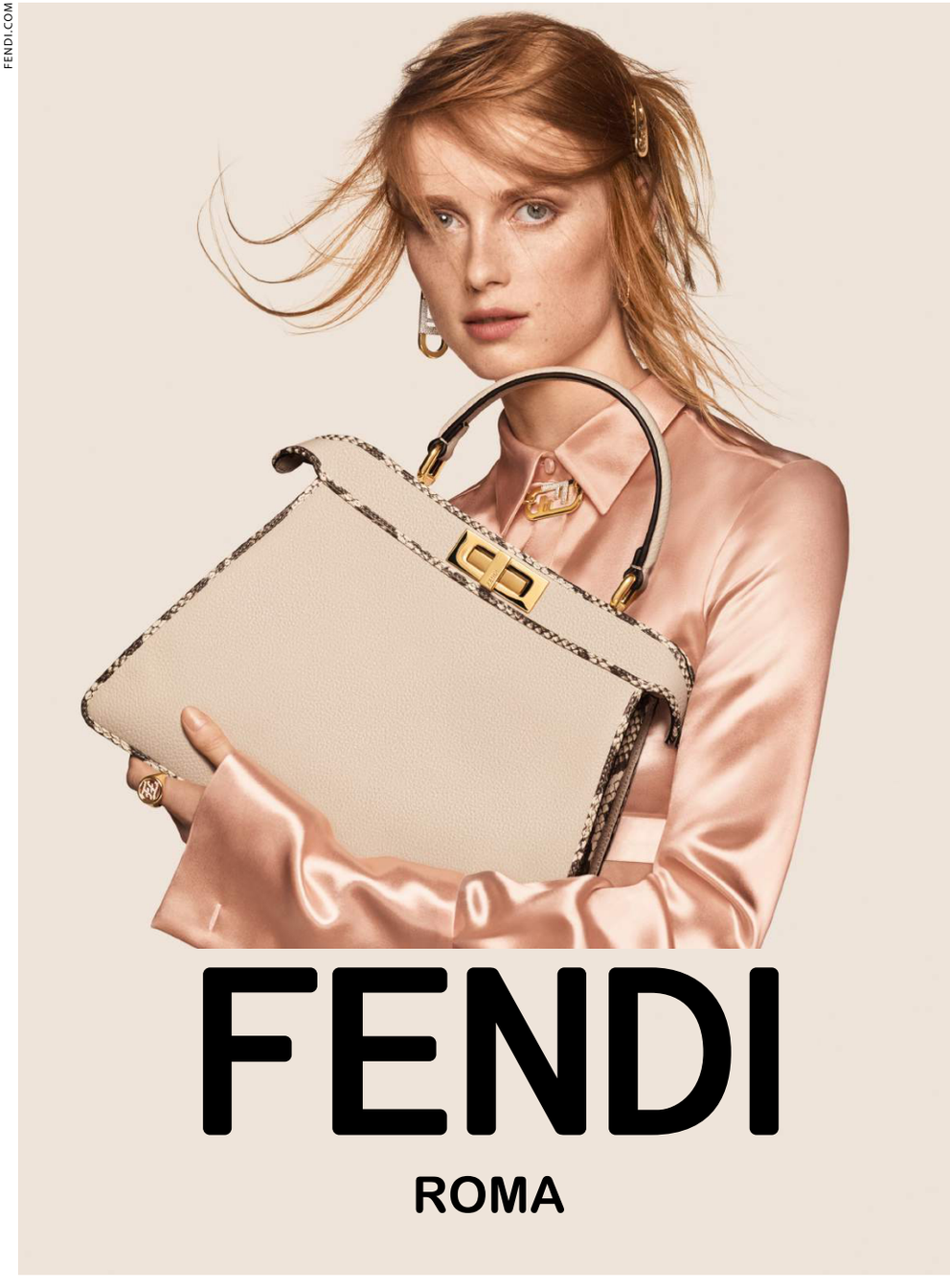

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Virgil Abloh
(1980-2021)

We had our first proper meeting with Virgil Abloh in the spring of 2017. By then, his Off-White label had really begun to capture both the hearts of streetwear fans and the attention of the fashion industry, even though it felt like the industry jury was still out on whether or not Virgil represented what a designer should be.

Having studied architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Virgil had long been an admirer of Rem Koolhaas. So he was beyond excited by our proposal that the two of them meet, along with arts curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, to record a conversation for our upcoming issue. Koolhaas was neither aware nor cared about fashion-industry snobbery, and was openly impressed by Virgil's back story, point of view, infectious energy, and the scale of business Off-White had already achieved.

By the time we completed *System*'s Autumn-Winter 2017 issue, Virgil had become its cover star, the subject of multiple interviews, an industry-wide survey, and the initiator (and focus) of an additional 70-page print booklet. Along the way, his legendary appetite for work had revealed itself to us, as had his deep curiosity and natural role as a cultural catalyst. Putting him on the cover felt particularly exciting because of his genuine outsider status. Virgil knew that, and took pleasure in the fact he was opening hitherto closed doors, shifting perceptions, inspiring others. He was also just a really nice man; there wasn't a cynical bone in him.

A short time after the publication of our issue, Virgil came over to London for a *System*-signing session at Shreeji, our local newsagents. Fans started queuing at 6am on what was a bitterly cold December morning, and by the time he arrived, fresh off the plane, Chiltern Street was awash with kids in hoodies. You didn't need to be a trend forecaster to understand what was happening. Virgil had galvanized a movement from outside the industry, drawing young people into an entirely new version of 'high fashion', while making seasoned insiders more aware of what new generations wanted. Three months later, he was appointed menswear designer at Louis Vuitton.

In the Uber ride after the chaotic signing event (he had stayed almost three hours and had chatted with everyone who'd queued) Virgil had a quiet moment to reflect on one final question from *System*. How did all *that* make him feel? The queues of fans. The endless autographs and selfies. The constant requests for career advice. 'When you're lucky enough to get a ride up to the penthouse,' he replied, 'it's your duty to send the elevator back down. You're only as good as your next generation.'

Today, as we reflect on Virgil Abloh's passing – at such an early age, and with so much still to achieve – the fashion industry does indeed feel like a profoundly different place. One suspects a generation of Virgil fans are already on their way up to the penthouse to ensure his legacy. R.I.P. V.A.

‘It feels a lot like freedom.’

How Demna Gvasalia’s Balenciaga has turned fashion on its head.

Photography by Juergen Teller
Creative partner Dovile Drizyte

In the six years since he joined Balenciaga as creative director, Demna Gvasalia has simultaneously reinvented the house and redefined luxury fashion. The brand now operates as a kind of 21st-century cultural beacon, through which a combination of oversized tailoring, archness, logo-mania, dystopia, streetwear, politics, Kim Kardashian, post-Soviet industrial cyber goth, 'ugly' dad sneakers, and multiple pop-culture references happily co-exist with an avant-garde reworking of traditional couture and Cristóbal Balenciaga's own esteemed heritage.

Along the way, Gvasalia has assembled his post-modern mash-up in such a way that it makes Balenciaga relatable to a Gen-Z audience, even though the brand's entry-level physical product – a basic white logo on black baseball cap – retails at $425. Balenciaga's recent collaboration with gaming phenomenon *Fortnite* – in which virtual branded 'skins' cost the equivalent of $12 – hints at a vision that has today's savvy and engaged teenagers now tantalisingly poised to become the brand's key consumer demographic, far sooner than for previous generations.

Balenciaga, it seems, seeps deeper into the popular consciousness each day, oscillating between high and low brow, mass and niche, celebrity and sub-culture, streetwear and couture, VR and IRL. And given that it's been reported the company generates over €1 billion in annual revenue, the prospects moving forward are eye-watering.

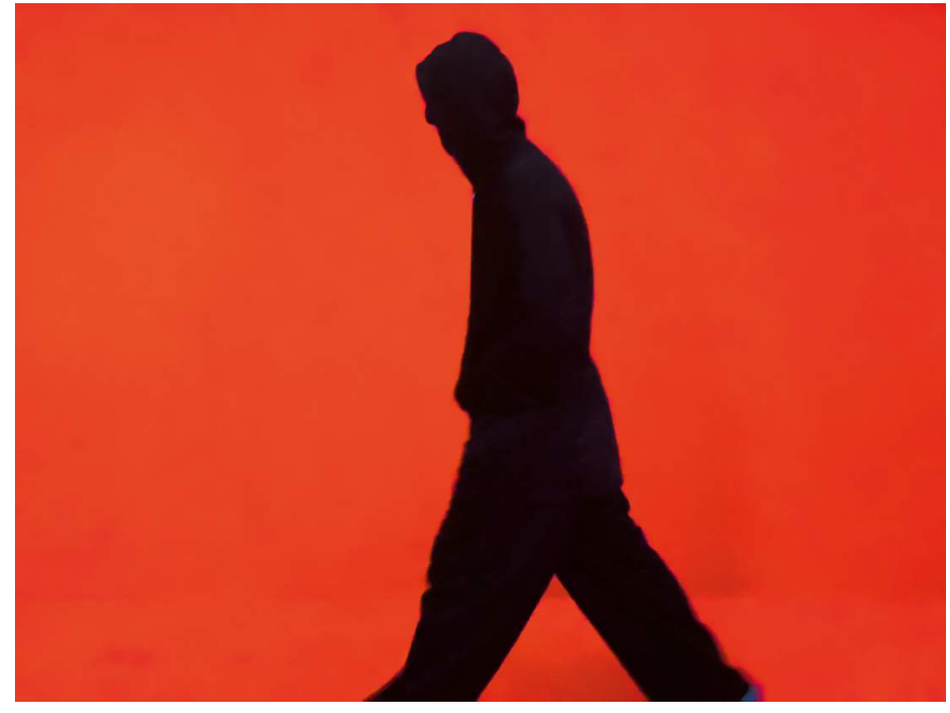
But with all the cultural domination and non-stop growth comes the question, when is big *too* big? When might ubiquity damage cult-like appeal? When does the avant-garde become the status quo? Over the past few months, *System* has taken a closer look inside the Balenciaga phenomenon. It's been a period in which the brand's unrelenting activity has stepped up a gear, and its cultural idiosyncrasies played out as much on Reddit as the red carpet.

The starting point of course is Gvasalia himself. In a series of wide-ranging conversations – with writer Cathy Horyn, alongside Balenciaga CEO Cédric Charbit, and on the phone with his one-time teacher Linda Loppa – Demna showed himself to be thoughtful, self-aware, amusing, incredibly focused and, in the parlance of the therapy he's been undergoing, 'in a good place'. Our conclusion? Balenciaga has turned fashion on its head – and it's a uniquely giddy and fearless place to be right now.

‘It’s my story now.’

Demna Gvasalia on the long journey from post-Communism to future couture.

By Cathy Horyn



To write about Balenciaga is to be drawn back to 1968, the year that Cristóbal Balenciaga abruptly closed the Paris couture house he had opened 31 years earlier. In a report on May 22 that year, the *New York Times* called him 'the prophet of nearly every major silhouette that changed the shape of women': the black taffeta harem dress and cape, the scarf-coat (immortalized by Irving Penn's photograph of his wife and model Lisa Fonssagrives), the semi-fitted suit, the sack dress, the baby doll, the cocoon coat, and the ultra-simple 1967 bridal gown in ivory gazar with a headpiece echoing a monk's hood, or, to the writer Mary Blume, a 'coal scuttle'.

'No other designer could be so heartbreakingly simple or so irrevocably complex,' Blume wrote in her widely admired study, *The Master of Us All: Balenciaga, His Workrooms, His World*. Born in the fishing village of Getaria, in the Basque country of northern Spain, in 1895, Balenciaga was a puzzle in lots of ways – beginning with the fact that he was a foreigner at the top of a French institution, haute couture. He dressed some of the world's most-alluring and most-photographed women, and yet, as Blume and others have noted, he showed his clothes on the oddest-looking models in Paris. His couture house at 10 Avenue George V was enormously profitable, especially after the Second World War, but he wanted no outward display of commerce on the premises. Hence the pure white salons on the third floor, an emblem of the silence that reigned throughout. ('In a room of 50 people you could hear the buzzing of a fly,' said designer André Courrèges, who trained with Balenciaga.) Hence the total absence of luxury products in the street-level windows, which he instead turned over to an artist named Janine Janet, who created eccentric sculptures out of materials such as bark, shells and nails.

With Balenciaga, everything was mysterious except, finally, the reason for closing. It was the 1960s, the rise of designer ready-to-wear and hip boutiques, and he 'believed that within his realm he had an obligation to provide leadership,' fashion writer Kennedy Fraser wrote in 1973, the year after he died. That belief in his authority is the reason his designs look so strong; it's also why he could not have compromised.

On the morning of July 7, 2021, I arrived early at 10 Avenue George V. Demna Gvasalia, the creative director of Balenciaga since 2015, was holding his first haute-couture show, and I wanted to absorb a moment whose significance went far beyond a debut. Gvasalia, along with the chief executive of Balenciaga, Cédric Charbit, and the Pinault family, which controls the brand's parent company, Kering, were reopening the house's historical base, closed since 1968. The salons and celebrated workrooms had been used for storage and offices, and until recently a Balenciaga boutique had occupied the ground floor, with bags and such displayed in Janine Janet's former windows. These were now boarded up in black. But the most stirring change was to see Balenciaga's name, in its original serif font, restored to the building's facade. One reason that great houses survive beyond their founders is the correspondence between the name and a building: Chanel *is* 31 Rue Cambon (it's now actually most of Rue Cambon); Dior is its big, drowsy corner of Avenue Montaigne. In Cristóbal's time, 10 Avenue George V was a phenomenal gateway, but since he apparently left no clear instructions about his name, it was used by his relatives in Spain to market ready-to-wear and perfume, and then sold to a German company. When I met Nicolas Ghesquière at the brand in 1999, it was owned by the cosmetics and fragrance company Groupe Bogart. The archive, run by Marie-Andrée Jouve, was in cramped quarters, and Ghesquière, who began at Balenciaga making funeral clothes for a Japanese licensee, worked out of a studio down the street from Dior. Once Gucci Group (now Kering) came into the picture, the brand set up on the Left Bank, eventually moving its current sprawling complex to Rue de Sèvres. The boutique on George V was simply in the former couture house – that was as far as any mythic connection to Cristóbal went.

I stood for a moment looking up at the elegant letters on the facade and then went inside.

In the past, clients would have entered through the boutique and taken the elevator – Blume, in her book, says it was lined with cordovan leather and 'patterned on an eighteenth-century sedan chair' – to the third-floor salon. Owing to structural changes, guests now took a beautiful and ancient flight of stairs, the iron railing distinctively marked at the base by a well-worn carved gargoyle. Was this the original employee and trade entrance, I wondered? I certainly couldn't imagine Mona von Bismarck or Bunny Mellon hopping up these steps for a fitting.

Gvasalia had relocated the salon to the first floor, but in every key detail – the white-plaster walls, white portières and plush sofas – it was a reproduction of the original. And though less visible, small nicks and water stains had been deliberately added to the decor, to suggest the passage of time. Of course, this is ridiculous. Time *did* stop here, for 53 years. No *petites mains* came to work; no heiresses rode the sedan chair. Gvasalia is a master of stagecraft – as we saw in his 2019 power-dressing show, with its blue set that resembled a modern parliament, and in early 2020, as the pandemic hit, with a show that evoked catastrophic flooding – and having explored the aesthetics of political power and chaos, it stands to reason that he would be obsessed with the aesthetics of couture. While the standard practice today among couturiers is to present *away* from the house, in a museum or dreamscape constructed in a tent, Gvasalia understood the power of drawing on an archetype.

I found my seat and chatted with my neighbours as we watched the scene. Kanye West, in a full head mask, was talking to Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton. NBA star James Harden arrived and took his seat, followed by the rapper Lil Baby. The chattering continued throughout the room and then, without warning – that is, without music – the first model, Eliza Douglas, a Gvasalia favourite, was crossing the carpet in a black pantsuit, and the chattering stopped with the abruptness of starlings. By the fifth or sixth number, also black tailoring and shown on both sexes, the room fell into a deep hush. Kanye was forgotten. The only thing I noticed was how impeccable everything was, how right the clothes looked. Gvasalia had taken the shapes and gestures for which he is known, like oversized suiting and pieces worn off the shoulders, like a trench coat or a fake-fur jacket with jeans, and refined them. A grey hoodie had been given the same polish as a suit. In some styles there was a trace of a Cristóbal design, like his famous 1955 sailor shirt, which seemed to find an echo in a trim, two-piece orange outfit with a stand-away collar. Unable to improve upon Cristóbal's 1967 wedding gown, Gvasalia said later that he had simply remade it, replacing the cap with an opaque nylon veil.

Modern in form and purpose, the collection was a great argument for why couture matters. First, it proved costume historian Anne Hollander's theory that one of the oldest sartorial forms – the masculine suit – has still not exhausted its possibilities, that with imagination and superb craft it can look new again. And second, by taking pains with such basics as jeans and T-shirts, it showed that the everyday can be more disarming than a beaded couture fantasy. Vanessa Friedman, writing in the *New York Times,* called it, 'a master class in how to learn from the past to get most effectively to the mid-21st [century].' And Rachel Tashjian, in *GQ*, wrote: 'Is it too crazy to think that Balenciaga's couture show […] might change the world?' Raf Simons, who saw the show online, told me that Gvasalia is 'the most modern designer there is right now'.

On September 13, Gvasalia escorted Kim Kardashian to the Met Ball, causing a sensation: both were dressed as conceptual silhouettes of themselves, all in black, their faces hidden. If couture was Gvasalia's 'coming out as a designer', as he later characterized it, then the Met indicated a distinctly different turn for Balenciaga. It's true that the house has dressed actresses from the very beginning – Marlene Dietrich and Rita Hayworth, to mention two – and during the Ghesquière years (Jennifer Connelly, Gwyneth Paltrow), but this was an unprecedented display by Gvasalia, who is modest by nature. Not only was it his first trip to the ball, but Balenciaga made a bigger celebrity strike, dressing Rihanna and Elliot Page as well.

Then, on October 2, Gvasalia took the notion of celebrity even further, with a 'premiere' at the Théâtre du Châtelet, as part of Paris Fashion Week. So familiar was the whole set up – the baying paparazzi, the dazzling expanse of red carpet, the classic preening – that it actually took a while for guests to register that the celebrities *were* the models and, what's more, some of them were Balenciaga staff, while others were guests who had unknowingly joined the parade. It was genius. And to top everything off, the premiere itself was a specially created 10-minute episode of *The Simpsons*, made in cahoots with Gvasalia and his team, in which Marge

'I remember seeing a Coke can for the first time and thinking it was a nuclear bomb. They brainwashed us into being suspicious of the Western world.'

'I had to study economic theories that I hated, like the basis of capitalism and international trade. I now think it was actually good for me as a designer.'

and Homer and the rest of Springfield strutted on the Balenciaga catwalk. I've never heard a fashion show audience laugh so hard.

Six years ago, Gvasalia, the founder of a scrappy label called Vetements, was virtually unknown except to insiders. Today, at 40, he has not only completely remade the house of Balenciaga in his vision – 'it's my story now,' he told me this autumn – but he is also leading and inspiring the industry by taking it into fresh terrain. Born in Georgia, then part of the Soviet Union, Gvasalia now lives near Zurich with his husband, the musician BFRND. For the first of two long conversations, we met on the day of the *Simpsons* show, at the Balenciaga corporate headquarters on Rue de Sèvres.

wearing Balenciaga, I have to be there. I was curious also. I wanted to be there and not be there. Not to be *seen*, because I have an issue with that. It's more like a personal psychological issue. [Laughs] And I thought, 'If I go there I want to enjoy it, so I don't want to stress about a picture of me that I won't like.' And because the topic of the exhibition was American fashion, I kept thinking about that, and for me, it's a T-shirt. It was so obvious. And then a silhouette being such an important thing – I always work around a silhouette when I do collections – I thought, 'Why don't I go as a Demna silhouette? What does it mean? Me as a shadow of myself, somehow.'

That was it. I literally wore to the ball what I wore on the plane to New York. I didn't change; I didn't wash or anything.

face. But I was, like, 'Do we even need to see your face to know it's you?' I told her, 'I think you're at that point of your fame where we can just cover you head to toe in a T-shirt, and people will still know it's Kim Kardashian.' And I love that notion of how strong the celebrity of someone can be expressed visually – in her case, through her body. Kanye was supposed to go to the Met, but for various reasons he couldn't. I think Kim wasn't comfortable being alone with a covered face. You can't see so well through this thing. I just said, 'OK, I'll walk with you.' That's how our prom date happened. Some people at first thought I was Kanye – and you know I like pressing those buttons. I really had fun on that beige carpet. [Laughs]

Did you stay for dinner?

'My dad's a car mechanic. He's as obsessed with cars as I am with clothes. He was lucky to have that business, tuning cars, in 1980s Soviet Georgia.'

Let's talk about the Met Ball. You were the man escorting Kim Kardashian.
My prom date. Never in my life at a prom, and what a date it was.

She looked amazing in the black version of the 1967 bridal gown. But it wasn't exactly the same dress, right?
No, no. We'd worked together on that concept since July. I wasn't planning to go to the Met, because that's not something I usually do or feel comfortable doing. But then Cédric talked to me and said, 'Demna, now you're doing couture, you've kind of opened up the whole thing. I think for this house to grow it's important that Balenciaga is represented in this way.' There were a lot of people already willing to wear couture to the Met, before Kim. I thought, OK, if all these people are

I also liked the idea of effortlessness because everybody gets so overdressed. It's Cirque du Soleil. We love it, we don't love it – I mean, it's amusing, but at the end of the day, it has very little to do with fashion, in my opinion. I wanted to kind of question that. I just slept in my sweatpants all the way to New York, arrived there and covered my face. And that's my Met look. It was almost anti-think in terms of expression.

And Kim?
We worked on her look with the same approach. I was, like, 'If you go in Balenciaga, then we need to do something stronger than you just wearing couture.' She has created a brand of herself and also kind of changed the notion of how people see beauty and body proportions. And obviously notions of her

I stayed for dinner. I mean, I could hardly get to the table; someone guided us. It was really fun. We took a picture with Sharon Stone, and I didn't know it was Sharon Stone because I couldn't see – I thought it was Jane Fonda.

That's hilarious.
With these kinds of events, it's all people you see in movies, and I was happy not to see all that, I have to say.

Let's talk about your July couture show. Even people who know your work well were absolutely spellbound. They didn't expect what they saw. Why did it get that response?
There was an emotional charge to the whole thing – for me, too. As creatives, this is the biggest challenge. We need to charge our work with an emotional

message. For me, it was so personal – the love and the effort I put in it. I think it was felt through the collection; I didn't have to explain it. But it was also like a coming out for me as a designer. Of course, there were a lot of people there who knew my work, though maybe not in depth. Yeah, the hoodie, oversized tailoring, streetwear, sneakers – all those things – but I'm not sure all those people really knew me as *that* kind of designer. So that was important. I think I told you when we spoke after the show that I felt so at peace. I felt like, 'I finally expressed who I really am as a designer, and people saw it and understood.' Not just the fashion insiders and historians, even from Kering and Balenciaga, there were some people who were actually surprised when they saw the couture. I showed them the

had to spend a couple of sessions with my coach talking about that, because it hurt me. Even though they gave me compliments, I was still like, how could they not have known? Did they also put me in that 'sneaker-guy' box? I needed to be out of that box, I have to say, and that's maybe what couture did. It really liberated me, in a way that was completely natural. I love doing sneakers and I love doing streetwear – I went to the Met in sweatpants – but there is a different type of elegance that I am about.

Of course there was streetwear – a hoodie, jeans, a T-shirt – in the collection but all perfectly made and fitted, along with your tailoring. That's what struck me – how you had refined and refined the Demna things and at the same time cast them in the world of

neck, swinging the pieces. The silhouettes have evolved a lot since my first collections for Balenciaga. I can still make a thing better, reach another level, and not be afraid of leaving my comfort zone. Couture was a manifestation of this exercise. Also, I had one year.

The lockdowns gave you more time.
We were working on the collection before the pandemic started. And then once I realized we wouldn't be showing in July 2020, everything changed because I had more time to reflect. At first, the collection was very much referencing the archive; it was too much into Cristóbal's work. I realized, 'OK, I have more time now, and I'm not 100% liking this.' I didn't want the collection to look like a historical tribute, even though it would have been good. Like the wed-

'I was eight years old when I knew that I was gay. I sensed it was a problem but didn't know how to deal with it. That's when I began daydreaming.'

collection on boards, and I found their reaction amazing somehow. They were, like, 'Oh, my God, that's a completely new thing. It makes so much sense, but I didn't expect it.' I felt really bad after those kinds of comments.

Because they underestimated you?
I realized they hadn't seen me for who I always knew I was. I think I came to Balenciaga knowing, deep inside, that I might one day have the possibility of doing couture. Which I couldn't do at Vetements. I mean, there would be no reason. In a way, Balenciaga was just such a perfect match for me as a designer. I realized in July that somehow I had wanted that, without daring to accept the idea, and when I felt that a lot of people who know me personally and know my work were surprised… I mean, I

Balenciaga, with his sense of line and precision. The off-the-shoulder styles worked into the fake fur, worked into the orange suit. You could clearly see the links to Balenciaga's aesthetic, yet it was hardly a pastiche or an homage. It was something entirely new.
It's been six years. As you mentioned, I have evolved. I always question myself; I think I'm my biggest critic. It's actually positive for a creative to do that because you should never stay in your comfort zone. The off-the-shoulder thing was something I did before I came to Balenciaga, all that swaggy attitude in clothes. It was an idea that came from the street. When I looked at Cristóbal's work, I thought, 'Hmm, he kind of did the same, but in a very different context, in a different time.' So I found that link and started working on it. Opening the

ding dress at the end, which was that symbolic thing. I could not have made it better than the original. So I had more time to infuse myself into the collection, my vision. It's my story now and I don't want to try to be Cristóbal Balenciaga, which I could never be. But I can be myself. This is also one of the reasons why I decided to show couture no more than once a year. With everything else that we do, it would be absolutely inhuman otherwise. Also, very limiting. The Federation [Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, which governs French fashion] doesn't even want us to be on the official calendar because we're not showing twice a year. Those idiots – I mean, I am so angry with them. I'm, like, 'How dare you try to impose these rules from the 18th century? Do you really believe that designers today,

with everything they have to do in their houses, can deliver quality like that every six months?' It's offensive, I find.

Do you need to be on the calendar?
No. They think it legitimizes everything; it legitimizes nothing. People will come to see my couture. I feel it shows the mindset. I also discovered that Balenciaga himself left the calendar because he had problems with the Federation. It makes more sense not to be included.

Who first approached you about the Balenciaga job?
Actually, I was on my way to the ANDAM fashion contest. My brother, Guram, wanted Vetements to take part in every possible contest, so we'd have more cash flow. [Laughs] And obviously we didn't win any of those contests. Balenciaga.' And a day after, I read on a news site that Alexander Wang was leaving. So I just put the two things together. Lionel doesn't like me saying this, but he was the first person who kind of recruited me. He saw that link between my approach to the body – he saw that Cristóbal cocoon reference in my bomber jacket – and for that I will be forever grateful, because not a lot of people see it even today. He kind of presented the idea to the people at Kering.

Then I had this meeting with François-Henri Pinault in the old Kering offices. I had to be very secretive, almost pretend I was somebody else so people wouldn't know. I had to go through the parking lot so people wouldn't see me. I was, like, 'Oh, my God, I've just come out of the gay club and I'm driving to the Kering headquarters.' him on YouTube, with his family members talking about him. And I realized he was a plastic surgeon of clothes. He would cut into a garment, open it, and it would change the whole posture. The magic tricks of Cristóbal. I saw that and I felt this is exactly what I do. Not with the same attitude, but I could feel that connection. Then I could also feel the connection through his personal story. He came from a modest background, the religious upbringing, being gay, not being accepted. I thought, these are all the things that link me to this person whose legacy is so massive in terms of possibilities. I simply could not not do it. Also, I was doing Vetements as my project, my reaction to the whole fashion establishment. I still loved doing it, but I always saw it as 'my project'. I didn't see myself as Karl Lagerfeld, at age 70

'I didn't sleep at night, trying to learn how to make a jacket. And, at the end of the day, what I learned about myself was that I didn't need those rules.'

I remember seeing you in your stand at the LVMH Prize cocktail in 2015. Virgil Abloh was across the aisle. That's funny, considering…
Yes! Somehow I have a bit of nostalgia about that, but we didn't win; it was very humiliating. We didn't win ANDAM either, but when I was entering the building at ANDAM, a person was standing there, someone I didn't know. It was Lionel Vermeil, who was then the PR at Balenciaga. He approached me and said, 'I know who you are. I want to talk to you about something. We're looking for a creative director for one of the houses owned by Kering. And we're interested in talking to you about that.' I don't know why but I knew instantly it was Balenciaga. It was a feeling in me. I remember, in the car later, saying to my husband, 'I'm pretty sure he means

For many people, you wouldn't have been an obvious candidate. And Ghesquière had proven hard to replace. How did you wrap your mind around that?
I studied; I prepared myself for that meeting. Of course, I knew about Cristóbal's iconic work, but I didn't really know so much. I knew more about the Ghesquière period. In fashion school, everyone wanted to be an intern at Balenciaga, myself included. I tried for menswear, but they didn't take me. I went for an interview and, like, five minutes later, they said, 'No, we're not interested.' So I needed to research Cristóbal as a couturier, to understand if I had a link. You know, I had a job already and that was a moment when Vetements was growing. I felt that if I did the Balenciaga job, something would need to trigger me. I watched this documentary about or 80, still doing that bomber jacket in a gay club. I wanted to move on, and Kering helped me to do that.

Was reopening couture part of your conversation with Pinault in that interview or during your first year as creative director?
No, absolutely not – it was the conversation I had with myself. The responsibility of this new era at Balenciaga was so scary for me – and definitely unknown to them – that the whole couture thing just stayed as a voice in my head. 'Maybe one day, if you're good enough' – me being my father's voice in my head! – 'you may want to talk about that.' Then it came up two years ago. I thought, 'OK, it's all great. I'm enjoying doing fashion, making upside-down parkas, but I need something else for myself.' Actually,

it was more about me being happy as a designer rather than making them happy. Obviously I wanted to honour the Balenciaga legacy but that wasn't my primary desire. That was about not wanting to fall out of love with fashion.

You brought such prestige to Balenciaga with the couture. The house is once again on the same level as Chanel and Dior, and maybe even a little more interesting because of your approach. I remember wondering during the show whether Pinault appreciated this.
I think he did. I first talked to him about couture maybe two years ago. We have these annual design meetings when we talk about the next steps for the brand. In one of those, I said, 'I want to do couture', and they loved the idea. I immediately felt supported – by him, by Cédric.

Did you have to open new ateliers and find skilled workers?
All of that. We started by recruiting the team, because we can't use the same atelier for haute couture that we use for ready-to-wear. It's a very different dynamic. In ready-to-wear, we have three to four fitting sessions on each product; that's the maximum I can have. In couture, I have 10 sessions, and there are bigger gaps between the sessions so that the atelier can actually do the work. We needed two different structures for that. I don't remember which house closed its couture around that time, but people said, 'Oh, we can get workers from there.' And I said, 'Wait a second, we don't need to do that.' Of course, if they're good people, sure, but we can also have people grow from our existing teams. There are so many young pat-

'Everyone wanted to be an intern at Balenciaga, me included. I tried for menswear, but five minutes into the interview they said, 'No, we're not interested.''

I didn't have to go and convince them that this was the right thing to do. On the other hand, they have always given me carte blanche. They said, 'If you feel this is the right thing to do…' It wasn't, like, 'Oh, yeah, we want to do it because it's going to bring Balenciaga to a different level.' Maybe they thought that, I don't know, they just gave me the feeling that if you think it's the right thing and it's part of your vision, then you should go for it and we'll support you. I have to say that has made my life here so much easier. I've had this carte blanche since the beginning. Nobody told me, 'Make a sneaker.' When I did make the sneaker, they rolled their eyes a bit. But they knew that, with me, we weren't going to follow the rules necessarily. They didn't ask me to do elevated streetwear. It was just, do what you think is right.

tern-makers in our ready-to-wear who are absolute fanatics about what they do. To me, they were the perfect candidates to move to couture. We could let them grow and not *only* have a couture team of people with 40 years' experience at Yves Saint Laurent or Dior, who have their own rules. Tradition is great, but if you want to see a future for this type of craft, then the teams need be at least under the age of 40. I'm sorry, but otherwise what's going to happen in 20 years? Who will know how to do that armhole?

Azzedine Alaïa once told me the same thing. He was expanding his atelier and he took some people from Saint Laurent's couture workrooms when they closed. But he said they had been doing the same kinds of clothing for years, so hadn't acquired new methods.

And it's hard to have them grow with you, because it's like taking someone with knowledge and trying to reshape that. Whereas I have people who know me from ready-to-wear so I knew they're so crazy about what they're doing that they would spend nights trying to figure out how to make the collar of that orange jacket. I mean, I think that was the most complex thing we, or at least I, have ever made at Balenciaga. That guy was 29 years old, and that was his challenge. We did have to take some people from outside, too, especially people who sell couture. We have this person, who is in her late 60s or 70s, who worked for many years at Saint Laurent couture, then at Gaultier couture, and now she's here. She has her *carnet d'adresse*. Sometimes she looks in it and says, 'Oh, this person I didn't contact because she might not be alive any more.' She actually told me this – laughing – because some of these people she knew 30 years ago. But the beauty of couture at Balenciaga is that we don't want to only have that client book. We have approached our ready-to-wear customers who spend tons of money and suggest maybe they don't need to buy that much ready-to-wear, and instead just buy one couture trench. And those people came to the salon and bought.

How are the sales?
Well, it's ongoing. It's not like ready-to-wear with only one week of selling. We had 27-year-old twin brothers – I don't know from which country – come and order about 12 looks, including women's looks, because they want to have them in their collection. We had a lot of

BALENCIAGA

men and a lot of people under 35, like daughters of some of the people in that address book. So far, from what I've heard, it's really rejuvenated.

What's been popular?
They wanted the jean jacket with an attitude and the trench. I think they did sell a crazy embroidered dress to someone in the Middle East. But, I mean, those will cost $300,000. For me, it was clear: if couture is only that, it will never survive. But the denim jacket and the vicuña turtleneck, these are the pieces that people bought. Of course…

I thought about stealing that vicuña turtleneck after I touched it…
The jeans. Shirts. Tailoring. That's what was important to me. How do we put couture in the context of now? Of course, in July, so we'll recreate the salons there. I'm curious to see the reaction. They're very modern in their approach. They're not looking for embroidery.

Will you do fittings there?
Yes, but the problem is our people can't go because of the length of the quarantine, so we created a team there coached by people here. There are 10 fitting rooms in the salon that we've prepared. Customers can try on things and order.

High fashion has always thrived on an image of exclusivity. Couture, with its specialized knowledge, its privileged access, and prices, is a symbol of that. Yet you've been so much about inclusivity, by taking streetwear seriously and showing your clothes on a very diverse cast in terms of physical beauty.
Because you still have to come to Paris, or wherever this installation will go. You have to make an appointment with a *vendeuse* [saleswoman]. It's not *that* accessible yet, and for me it has to be fully inclusive. I'm even thinking we'll open some couture store-showrooms where people can just walk in and see things and potentially order. I'm talking to Cédric about this because it's obviously an investment.

But part of the allure of made-to-measure Paris clothes is the experience, the incredible quality and attention to detail. I've had clothes made for me at Chanel and Alaïa, and there's nothing quite like it. I'm not sure I'd want to go to a storefront…
You can have access to any of that, but there are a lot of people who would not, though maybe they have the means and

'The Margiela mindset liberated me. I'd never have dared cut up an existing jacket to make a new one. I'd have been, like, 'Oh no! You can't do that!"

the robe and the coat that Rihanna wore at the Met, but they're special red-carpet pieces. Who has a life like that?

I remember covering couture in the late 1990s. The clients were still a huge presence, but then they went away. They were active but less public. Yet, with such tremendous wealth in the world, why wouldn't someone buy couture?
Exactly. I knew I wanted to create a new niche, one that does not exist. Couture is about magnificent embroideries or a Chanel jacket, of course, but I wanted to open the conversation to a new generation that, yes, has financial credibility and who also gets it. I'm very curious because in November we're having an installation in China with all the couture pieces. It's such an important market for us, but people from Asia could not come to couture

I'm thinking of the Spring 2020 'parliament' show, for example.
I can't wait for you to see tonight, because that's the maximum I've done in terms of diversity. Not just in terms of gender or origins but types of people. It has never been as good as tonight.

Why does that matter?
I think it's what makes you a modern brand today, especially with our approach to couture. One major difference between couture now and back then is that Balenciaga wouldn't let certain people into the salons. There was a woman at the door who said, 'No, no, you are not intellectual enough', or whatever she thought. It was so exclusive, very snobby. Today, it's the extreme opposite of that. I'm thinking now about how I can make couture even more accessible.

the desire. Even if you have a couture store, it's the same thing that you would have in the atelier – this whole made-to-measure treatment. For me, it's how to make it more inclusive, not something only for industry insiders and rich ladies and celebrities, who often don't even pay for it, they just expect it to be done for them. How can a regular paying customer have access to what I think is the closest you get to perfection in clothing? Maybe the store is not the answer. I was in Getaria this summer and I saw that Cristóbal's first boutique was on the first floor of a building, like an apartment. It was a salon, basically. I thought, Wow, that's an amazing idea. People come to a private apartment.

By the way, what's going to happen to the boutique on Avenue George V?

It's going to be a modern part of the building. In Cristóbal's time the windows were used for an artist's installations. That's what I want to do with them, too. But rather than just use the shop windows, it's going to be the whole floor. During Fashion Week, it could be open for the public to come in. Not as a retail space; just for display. Maybe there are couture pieces or other products.

It fascinates many people how versatile you are as a designer, able to take on big themes like political power in one show and catastrophe in the next, and at the same time make a crazy parka or experiment with 3D printing for tailoring. Lagerfeld, as productive as he was, did not have that split in his focus. I can understand why you once said you view couture as a way of slowing down
in my life – then there is no limit. But you mentioned wanting to 'clean up' – that I understand. It's probably what I wanted to say with couture and the way it felt. Also the silence. It's my way of meditating through fashion. Slowing down, making some distance, being in silence. Couture also came at the right moment for me, professionally; I feel like it really gave me another decade in fashion. You know what I mean? I love doing fashion, but sometimes when you have all these deadlines, it can be too stressful. It can become too much like a machine, and then you lose interest.

I can imagine how couture would give you huge satisfaction.
It somehow gives me durability of interest in fashion. Because it's the only thing I've ever wanted to do. I don't want to be

Tell me about your design process. Do you first work out ideas at home in Switzerland and then go to the team?
I'm a loner in general. I need to be alone often in order to connect to myself. That's how I start every season, mostly at home, where I start editing the ideas. My ideas come as lists, and lists of lists, and a huge number of visuals that I keep on my phone. Then I archive the images in boxes: boxes for collections, campaigns, concepts. Then twice a year, I basically go through all this stuff and edit it, whatever triggers excitement in me. It's very random. I'm a voyeur; I constantly take pictures or screenshots of things. The season for me is really two collections. For example, what we are showing tonight and what we'll show at the end of November. It's one season, essentially.

'I fell absolutely in love with Marc [Jacobs] as a person. Sometimes he'd call his assistant to bring the karaoke suitcase and then sing Barbra Streisand.'

or 'cleaning up' your mental process.
Did Lagerfeld meditate?

Actually, he worked alone in the mornings at home. That was essential in his routine. He worked in his bedroom, sketching and sketching or talking to the studio about the day's work. No one disturbed him.
I have a complex of inferiority right now. [Laughs] To wake up and sketch, that is crazy. But maybe because I'm married to a musician, I wake up with, like, bass pumping. We're like an after-hours club at breakfast. Literally, this morning the neighbours knocked on the door because it was too loud. But, yeah, that's crazy to wake up and sketch. Maybe I don't 'live' fashion in that way, but I have made that space in my life. Before noon, there is no fashion

trying to channel Helmut Lang or any of those other amazing designers who at one point said, 'OK, I've had enough now; I'm going to do something else.' I'm not sure I can ever do that. But I always question whether it's something I want to do always. There are so many things I disagree with about the industry, but during the pandemic I realized this is what I do best – clothes. Now I'm trying my hand at set design. I've been doing it at Balenciaga, but now we've done it for Kanye's *Donda* [album] launch, which was an amazing experience. I like doing it. I'm going to try directing BFRND's next music video, probably. But then, again, I go back to clothes. This is my zone. This is what I love most, and I don't want to give myself a deadline for it. I just want to stay hungry and excited about it, and this is what couture did.

So it starts alone in my atelier at home. I need that time in silence to focus and to work things out. Then I have a meeting with my smaller team. It's Martina, my right hand, and a few designers, and we just brainstorm. After which, we launch the general research so the whole design team is involved. Then we edit everything, because we end up with so much stuff. Editing is a big part of my job. Cutting, pinning and editing. I love it. I love editing and collecting the information and then translating that into ideas. But also the process of scissors and pins.

Yet it often becomes a form of commentary…
It *is* political and social commentary. In my research, I'm not really interested in having a picture of a deconstructed

trench coat. I want to go into what this trench represents, whether it's social status or a comment on what is happening around us. I feel that being a voyeur lets me absorb all of that. It can be subconscious, not necessarily thinking, 'Oh, I need now to talk about refugees.' It is a big topic in my mind, because it's part of who I am and I'm trying to deal with my whole personal story. It's just there, and it's going to translate into my aesthetic and into the collection. The subjects that matter. And some of them are so strong I wouldn't even want them to surface in the work, because they can be overwhelming or maybe send the wrong messages.

For example?
Gender. I find it very tricky sometimes. Because maybe for me personally it's still an issue, sexuality and all those things. What does sexy mean? Have you seen the sexy Demna collection? [Laughs] I don't think that actually happened yet, and I think for a reason – maybe I'm a bit afraid of trying to understand what it means to me. And being vulnerable enough to let people see that. Because my sexy might be scary to someone, myself included.

Obviously the 'parliament' show was political commentary. I'm trying to be informed. I think it would be completely ignorant not to be interested in that.

Yet few designers show an inclination to do this, never mind the capability. It's partly what makes fashion feel a little disconnected. In the past, Gaultier did amazing shows related to gender and sexuality. Radical for their time.
Also, I don't want it to be too literal. For example, the walk-on-water show – I think it's one of my favourites in terms of set-up and message and it just happened to appear before this pandemic horror started. I referenced the Bible and Jesus walking on water. Do we believe it? If we believe in God, then maybe we do. I was questioning those things. What is reality? With all the conspiracy theories about a flat earth, and I don't know what else – we don't know *anything*. So Jesus might have walked on water or there might have been a platform underneath. But then we gave the show this extra charge by creating the smell of petrol, like a world drowning. This whole arena drowning in greed; it's disgusting. For me, the parliament show had the same level of disgust – about European politics and what happens in Brussels.

When I was 17, I worked as a translator for a Georgian news channel for foreigners. It was in English and I spoke the best English by Georgian standards at the time, so I could translate the news. And I have to say, when you have insight into dirty, corrupt politics in a post-Soviet country at 17, you get hooked on that a bit. It's also part of me, through that kind of commentary.

You're the only prominent designer from a former Soviet state, so your perspective is already different.
Strange, though, I have to say. This business is so about decorative dreamland creations, and that's what I'm absolutely uninterested in. It's a turn-off just to decorate things. You know, my view is not satirical; I want to do things in an artistic way. I see a show as an artistic installation, similar to what we did, though at a different level, for Kanye's *Donda* tour. There was this messaging that was subliminal, that was very personal but also very poetic and aesthetic. We can talk about things happening in the world, but I also want to create that aesthetic link. It has an impact, but it's also about beauty – and that's what fashion is. Sixty percent of Balenciaga's customers are under 35, and because these people are so connected, it matters to them, too. It triggers something.

The pace of change in just the past few years is truly breathtaking, and how differently young people perceive things…
I spoke to a few journalists recently and I felt so much negativity. I was frustrated and I told my husband about it. Maybe fashion has become a bit constipated. I've been questioning this whole thing about a show. Does it make sense? We want to be at a show but, on the other hand, it's kind of boring. This is why I'm trying something else tonight, you'll see. It's just trying. I'm not sure it works or not, but I want to try something else. I just want this to be fun. But the change needs to happen, and it's a moment.

Well, you're very nimble.
What is nimble?

Flexible, quick. Many designers are stuck in their comfort zones, lack ideas or are afraid of going off brand message.
Even here, this season, when I told them that there wasn't a show, they were, like, 'What is it?' I was, like, 'It's a premiere.' I didn't want to do a video, because we did a feel-good video in May and people loved it. There was no product in it. I was, like, 'Why don't we do something that is just fun?' It was a dream: *The Simpsons.* The whole humour and tongue in cheek, and also the kind of romantic, beautiful part of *The Simpsons*. I've always loved it. My husband has a Bart tattoo on his arm and when I met him in person, I thought, 'That's a sign. From above. We have to come together.'

I was told *The Simpsons* never do stuff like this. They don't do specials with brands. Then we contacted them, and they were, like, 'Hmm, we like Balenciaga.' Actually, the parliament show was a trigger. I mean, the creators of *The Simpsons* are really not into fashion at all, but they could see that there was something behind the clothes.

We had been working on the film for a while and then suddenly Fashion Week was back and I'm, like, 'Uh, what do I do with this episode that has no collection in it?' It's Springfield goes to Paris Fashion Week. I've watched it 10 times and I love it still.

So there is this fun moment, which I feel we need. I wanted it after couture, which was so monastic. I wanted something that would break that. So I said, 'Let's do a premiere. And let's use the ridiculous red carpet as the actual show.' We wanted to dress everybody [in the audience], but that was logistically difficult. So now we have 65 people who are going to arrive there tonight.

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During my first meeting with Demna Gvasalia, I did not probe him for details about his plan for a red-carpet premiere followed by a Balenciaga episode of *The Simpsons* at the Théâtre de Châtelet that evening, and, in hindsight, I was glad I didn't. Nothing could have prepared me, and others in the audience, for the surprise and downright sense of fun. And it sprang from the purity of the concept – having a group of sophisticated people 'walk' on the carpet, unaware that their gestures and self-conscious posing were being recorded and shown on a giant screen inside the theatre, to the delight of those already seated. And of course, who is more guileless than the Simpsons? Early in the special episode, Homer, wishing to buy a dress for Marge's birthday, pens a letter to the Paris house: 'Dear Balun, Balloon, Baleen, Balenciaga-ga.' The collaboration with the creators of *The Simpsons* began in April 2020, and as Al Jean, an executive producer and writer, told the *New York Times*, Gvasalia and his team 'were definitely our match in terms of, to the last detail, making sure everything was perfect'. To date, the episode has been viewed nearly 9 million times on YouTube.

For our second conversation, on October 5, Gvasalia and I spoke in the white salon at 10 Avenue George V.

So you go from creepy shows about political power and hints of disaster to *The Simpsons*. I wrote down your character's response to Marge's sad little letter, when she returns the €19,000 dress: 'This is exactly the kind of woman I want to reach!'
It was hilarious. And she just wanted to wear it for a day. I find that the most beautiful thing.

Again, you are able to work on multiple levels, from the rarefied world of haute couture, which also incorporated mass-market looks like jeans, to one of the most popular shows on TV.
Which is just about fun. It's also a critique, especially the red-carpet part. I enjoyed mixing my assistant Telly with my usual Balenciaga models, who most people think are not beautiful, and then having Juergen [Teller] there and Offset. What *is* that? Is anyone a celebrity just because they're posing on the red carpet? The Met Ball was quite an experience, even though we had started working on our show before. Still, I could see the impact.

It's probably how most people see fashion – on celebrities at events such as Cannes. It also reminds you of how human the desire for beauty and glamour is; it's hardly limited to celebrities.
A lot of people from my team and my models came up to me at the party afterwards and said, 'Oh my God, Demna, thank you. This was amazing, I felt like a star.' I thought, Wow, that's a Marge Simpson moment. It's so psychological, right? One of the guys who we cast from the street – who has never been in a luxury store in his life – was, like, 'Where did you find me? I feel like I'm Brad Pitt now because everybody comes up to speak to me, just because my picture was taken on the red carpet.' This is why I love being able to do what I do today at Balenciaga.

Here's my picture from the red carpet the other night. [I hand my phone to Gvasalia, who bursts out laughing.]

'Nobody told me, 'Make a sneaker.' When I did make the sneaker, they rolled their eyes. But they knew that, with me, we weren't going to follow rules.'

'I sometimes find gender very tricky. Maybe for me personally sexuality is still an issue. What does sexy mean? Have you seen the sexy Demna collection?'

That's amazing! I hadn't seen that. Wow!

Of course, I didn't know that everybody was inside the theatre and looking up at the screen and *laughing* at me. All the photographers, who I know from the runway, were yelling, 'Cathy, Cathy', so I played along.
The funny thing, which nobody knows, is that the soundtrack for the event was all fake. We actually used a recording from last year's Met Ball. Sometimes you can hear somebody yell, 'Beyoncé', but nobody noticed. I loved that, because even though the soundtrack was not synchronized to our red carpet, it still worked. It was another detail that no one knew about, apart from BFRND and I, but it underlined the unimportance of that in a way. Beyoncé had nothing to do with this event.

'It *is* political and social commentary on what is happening around us. I want to go into what a trench coat actually represents, its social status.'

I'd like to talk about your family and early career. What did your parents do for a living?
My father had a car wash and a garage. He's a car mechanic, my dad, and he's as obsessed with cars as I am with clothes. He was lucky to have that business, tuning cars and so forth, in 1980s Soviet Georgia. My mum was a housewife. When I was born, she was 17.

Is your mum Russian or Georgian?
She's part Russian and part many other things, like French, Jewish, Albanian. But she's mostly Russian and my dad is Georgian.

And Guram is your only sibling?
Yes, but we lived in a kind of communal place with all my cousins and grandmother. A kind of a kibbutz, which actually shaped me in many ways. There were three houses where my dad's three brothers lived with their families, and then my grandmother and us. Everybody would have breakfast together. Literally, at any time, anyone could just walk into your bedroom. There was very seldom any space of privacy, and I always suffered through that because I was a bit of a loner. I wanted to draw, and I didn't want to play football or dig around in the car with my dad. I just needed my space and it was very hard to gain it in that kind of place. I'm still working on how it impacted me, but I think it did a lot. This is why I always felt like an outsider there, even in this big family. I would go into the garden behind the house and just sit and draw there. I think I had a bit of an issue with being social with people, even with my cousins and uncles. I had a happy childhood, but I always dreamed about something and it was not part of where I grew up, really. I didn't identify with this very Georgian way of being altogether all the time; Italians do that, too. You go on holiday with the family. Everything that's yours is mine; whoever wakes up first is the best dressed. It was a bit like that.

When did you first know you wanted to leave?
I did have this feeling very early on, and I think it was more linked to my sexuality, because I knew I could not fully be myself in this environment, in my family, even in that country. The country still has huge issues with the LGBTQ community. It's a nightmare, actually. I cannot go back there for those reasons. I think I was eight years old when I knew that I was gay, and I sensed that was a problem and I didn't know how to deal with that. That's when I began daydreaming, 'OK, I'm going to have to study well, so that one day I can leave and be myself.' I didn't realize that coming to Europe didn't necessarily mean that you will be accepted. Very early on I did express this desire to my parents. I was also really good at school.

Which subjects?
I was not good at maths; I had a private teacher for that. But I was good at literature, languages, biology. In a Soviet school, you have to study all of that. So I was always telling my parents that one day I would be ready to fly off. They weren't really thinking of leaving the country themselves. But when I was 16 or 17, I was really looking into options, like being an exchange student or looking for asylum. I resolved to go to Holland and just say, 'I'm gay.' [Laughs]

But you stayed and earned an economics degree, so I imagine you have a good understanding of economic theory.
I had to study all these theories that I hated, like the basis of capitalism and international trade. I hated it all back then, but I have to say now that it was good for me as a designer. It probably shaped me as a different type of creative. I'm very product-oriented, for one thing. I'm interested in what I can deliver to the consumer, what the consumer actually desires. So there was a silver lining in it, but I hated those four years there. I was writing in my school notebooks, and on the back I was sketching

clothes. It was this bipolar way of life. When I told my dad I wanted to study fashion and become a designer, he was, like, 'This is not a job. You can do it on the weekends, but you have to work in something else.'

Because he didn't know about fashion designers or how clothing is produced?
I think it was a combination of those things, and also in his macho Georgian mentality that fashion was something girls should do. And I think he was afraid: 'Oh, he wants to do fashion, so he's definitely gay.' [Laughs] But I have to say I've been drawing clothes since I can remember. The first present I ever got was a set of colour markers, from my grandmother. In one week there was nothing left in those markers, because I just drew like a crazy person. That was my bunker in a way, where I would find my private space – before I knew that fashion design was an actual job. I thought it was done for movies. We didn't have that information in Georgia.

At some point your family moved to Düsseldorf…
My father started to have an import-export business with Germany, so he was there more and more. Then my parents sort of realized that neither I nor my brother wanted to stay in Georgia, because there were no prospects for us. Basically, the whole family moved, including my grandparents.

Was emigrating a difficult or strange experience?
For me, it wasn't that dramatic. I was already 20 or 21; I spoke German. I spent three months in an immigration camp, with all the other people. You'd get a number at seven o'clock in the morning and then go register for this or that office. When you emigrate, you have to go through so many steps, like your health registration or your job credibilities. It's quite hardcore. I was also the person in my family who spoke the best German, so I would have to interpret for them. It felt a little bit stressful. Also, Germany for me was the place from where I could go elsewhere; I didn't plan to stay. My economic diploma was recognized there, so I could have gone and, I don't know, filled out bank transfers for a living. And that's what my parents dreamed about: 'It's amazing. You can work in a German bank!' I would have died of misery and depression after two years. That's when I started researching about where I could go learn about fashion. I needed to go to school.

'After that 'parliament' show, a British writer said, 'Detestable – without hope.' I love that. That reaction is exactly what I hoped for.'

How did you choose the Royal Academy in Antwerp?
It was a friend of mine – my former English teacher in Georgia – who said, 'Demna, you should do what you want.' I couldn't afford Central Saint Martins, and she sent me a French newspaper in which there was an article about the best European art schools. It mentioned the tuition for each school. The Royal Academy was €500 a year because it's a state school. I thought, I have to try and go there.

You didn't know about the Antwerp Six?
I knew nothing. I didn't even know where Antwerp was. And then I got in. I remember Walter Van Beirendonck sitting in front of me during the entrance interview, with other teachers. I didn't know who Walter was, and he said, 'So, tell us what you know about the Antwerp Six?' I only knew about Dries Van Noten. I really had no knowledge. No Margiela, no nothing. I think Walter was quite pleased with me for not knowing who he was. It was kind of a destiny because I failed the interview, they told me later, but passed the drawing and fashion part.

So, you're in Antwerp at an exciting time in fashion. Gucci Group and LVMH are buying up houses like Balenciaga. Margiela is still working. Galliano is remaking Dior. Helmut Lang is still active. That's a lot to absorb, never mind the legacy of the Antwerp Six. Where was your head at the time?
I don't think I realized any of that then. Of course, being in Antwerp, you're in the hotspot of Belgian fashion. Linda Loppa was still teaching at the Academy; I was in her last year there, so I was lucky to have her as my tutor. But I don't think I was really aware of the dramas that were going on in fashion. I didn't have any idea yet of what I wanted to become. I knew that I wanted to do clothes and that I had to find myself. I did not find myself while I was in Antwerp, I realized later; it was really research, but very naive research. I was open to direction. Very often in a school like the Academy you can be directed by your tutors in a direction that might not necessarily be yours.

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My experience with Linda was one of the best experiences that I had. She looked at my project at the beginning of the year and asked, 'Would you wear it?' I said, 'Actually, no. It's like a costume.' And she said, 'Do you know *anybody* who would wear it?' I was, like, 'OK, I have to change my project.' She opened my eyes to how important it is that you shouldn't just make costumes. Fashion is not that; it's not a dreamland. We can argue about that, but for me, it's important that if I make something, it's destined to be worn by somebody. That was probably the most important thing I learned during my four years in Antwerp. Just picture somebody wearing your designs.

At school I went with the flow – and the flow was like kayaking in a crazy sea. There was no direction, really, and it by eye. I could just draw a pattern. A friend of mine, who was my tutor in pattern-making, said to me, 'I don't get how you do it. It's against the rules, but it works in the end. So is it good or bad?' And I was, like, 'As long as it works, I don't care.' But I had this eye. And I'm still very hands on when it comes to fittings and working on shapes.

I have very positive memories of Antwerp, but also I remember this hunger. I was so bulimic for all this information. I needed to absorb it all – about Raf Simons and Margiela and Dries, all very Belgian. I have to say I didn't know much about other things in the fashion world.

After that, Walter was my first job. He saved me. He liked me but we had a lot of, like, you know, disagreements. By the third year of school, I had my idea: I wanted to do all black and a lot

'I wore the sweatpants I slept in on the plane to the Met Ball. I arrived in New York, and just covered my face. It was anti-think in terms of expression.'

it felt very dangerous. I was worried. It was so much money, which I didn't have. I had to scrabble here and there to survive, because making a collection, buying the fabric, was quite difficult for somebody like me. How am I going to pay off all this? Where am I going to get a job? At the same time, the Academy is quite competitive. They read your results in front of the whole school. It's judgement day. With every jury, some people were out.

I learned a lot about making clothes, because I didn't have money to hire pattern-makers and seamstresses, which you can do now, if you have the money. I literally didn't sleep at night, trying to learn how to make a jacket. And, at the end of the day, what I learned about myself was that I didn't need those rules and special measurements. I could do of tailoring. And Walter didn't like that. We had moments when it was, like, 'Oh, God, he's going to throw me out of here.' But it was his way of guiding me; we're still friends. At the time, he was working for a brand, a bit of a Belgian Ralph Lauren [Scapa Sports], and he wanted some younger designers on his team, so we could make something fun, which didn't work out. But I had a job. I had the job before I graduated, thanks to Walter. I stayed for less than a year because I felt, 'OK, I'm going to shrink into this commercial mindset.' You know, making your sketches on a screen, when I needed to cut and drape.

Were you applying for jobs in Paris?
Everywhere. Paris, New York, Milan. I think I sent out around 90 portfolios. But most of the graduates did that, too. I send Margiela my portfolio.' Maybe it was my economics mind, but I thought, 'They need to open it, they need to look at it', because I know often in companies they get things they don't even bother to open. I thought the packaging was important, so I put it in a pizza box from a restaurant called Don Giovanni. The CEO was called Giovanni, too. That got their attention – and it was not a fresh pizza box! I was, like, 'Let's just go for it.' And it really worked. They called me and said, 'We want you to join the team. Can you move to Paris in 10 days?' I lived in a friend's apartment, on the couch, for three months until I could find an apartment. But, for me, it was OK. The door opened suddenly to Paris.

Margiela himself had retired from fashion at that point and the house was

owned by Diesel. What shape was the Margiela archive in, if there was one?
It was a nightmare. It was full of moths; things were on the floor. It was hardcore, but there was a lot there. As a young creative, I didn't have a chance to work with him, but being in the archive – with everything smelling of naphthalene – I loved that. It was such an intimate moment for me. Seeing how the shapes were made, how things were destroyed and something new made from them. That whole mindset liberated me. I would never have dared to cut up an existing jacket to make a new jacket before that. I would have been, like, 'Oh, no, you can't do that! You need to construct it.' At Margiela, I learned to work three-dimensionally. It gave me my understanding of what I could dare to do with clothes.

And Marc was doing some brilliant collections.
I learned a lot from him. On an aesthetic level, it was perhaps hard for me to connect with him, but that's OK, that was my job. For example, he wanted a perfecto [leather jacket] embroidered with feathers because he saw a Cher movie on the plane. You know how he is. [Laughs] I fell absolutely in love with Marc as a person, as a visionary. Sometimes he would call his assistant to bring the karaoke suitcase and then he would

'You can't see so well through the face covering. We took a picture with Sharon Stone, but because I couldn't see, I actually thought it was Jane Fonda.'

Did you ever meet Martin?
No, but I wrote a letter to him to express my gratitude. I really did stay at the brand to save the legacy, with good intentions.

You told me that once.
But it was so hard because I was a nobody there. I stayed two years, until I kind of indirectly got fired. They offered me another part of the collection that I was not interested in, and then I just left and never went back. I was just angry because I wanted to give so much to that house and somehow nobody wanted it.

I thought, 'OK, I've had this experience; now I need to understand how a big brand works.' Then a headhunter called me and told me they were looking for someone at Vuitton, with Marc. I thought, 'Oh, God, not my thing at all, but why not?' I made a big project and Marc loved it, apparently, and then I got my job at Vuitton. I have to say, for designers, working at Vuitton is kind of a dream. You have great resources, super conditions, a good contract, a wardrobe budget. It was amazing.

When you started Vetements, with some friends and your brother, it was in reaction to big brands. I remember our first meeting, in the Vetements showroom, when I told you I thought it looked too much like Margiela. Vetements was about other things, but I didn't know if the Margiela influence was a sign that you were still finding your own way.
I think it was very much about that. I sing Barbra Streisand. I was, like, 'Now I see how you can have fun being a designer!' On Saturday night with the red-carpet show we tried to do that for the public, and at work I sometimes think, 'This is too corporate. I'm not singing karaoke, but let's have fun. Let's make this fitting into a party.' That's something I learned from Marc Jacobs.

remember you said that. A lot of people drew this parallel, also because we marketed Vetements as a group of people who used to work at Margiela. To be honest, at the beginning, Guram wasn't there. I was there with two other people, both of whom now work with me at Balenciaga. Both used to be my assistants at Margiela, and they left when I left. While I was at Vuitton, I realized I needed to have my own creative expression. I had put some money aside while I was working at Vuitton, so I was OK. That's how Vetements started. We were, like, let's do something on the weekends, because we still had our day jobs. We were a team. We were three people exchanging ideas, sitting and smoking Gauloises and drinking wine the whole night. And brainstorming. That's how we came up with a heel made from a lighter. It was three o'clock in the morning. We had a shoe shape and we were, like, 'What do we do with the heel?' And we didn't have heels to try. Today, I have 20 different heels to try. There was the lighter: 'Well, there you go. That's a shoe.' It was this very spontaneous thing. I really didn't plan for Vetements to become a brand, but then Guram came in, he needed a job, and we said, 'Let's see if we can get some customers.' That's how we started.

I remember going to the show at the Dépôt club in Paris.
We'd already done two collections. I remember a friend, Lars, texted me – he's obsessed with you – and said, 'You have to see that Cathy Horyn mentioned you.' You wrote that you'd taken a motorcycle to get from one show to another…

True, with a driver.
Lars was, like, 'Can you imagine Cathy Horyn took a motorcycle to go to a gay sex club to watch a show?' I was, like, 'Probably mission completed by now.'

And of course, once you got into the Dépôt, which is tiny, it was crammed. Kanye was there. And the models were literally sweeping past your knees.
We didn't have a backstage until five minutes before. We had to put a curtain up. But that's also the beauty of it.

Everybody craves those moments – and we were seeing something new. I mean, there were distinct overtones of Martin Margiela, but I recall François Lesage, who worked with the greats, telling me that designers belong to a lineage, like a family style tree. Alaïa was in the

looked at Vetements. It was almost a means of self-therapy. And this is why it was hard to explain to you, or anyone, back then why there was this parallel to Margiela – because it was that.

I want to return to the 'parliament' show. It seemed a turning point for you. For one thing, you'd clearly put your personal stamp on Balenciaga, through the tailoring, the cast – who are as odd-looking in their own way as any of Cristóbal's – the uncanny feelings. Is it comic or serious? After that show, a British writer said to me, 'Detestable – without hope.'
I love that. That reaction is exactly what I hoped for.

I thought the show was funny precisely because it considered these serious,

laughing at us?' Or, 'Balenciaga is so cynical.' And it's not actually that at all. We're putting it out there because it feels relevant. It felt relevant to have the models walk on water. We did this whole video-tunnel show [Summer 2019] – one of my favourite set designs – that created this feeling between real and not real.

And now you've done something equally ambitious but playful with *The Simpsons*.
I need always to be surprised. I need that moment of, what the hell is going on? For me, Saturday was a bit of that. But it's also what's next? I'm never going to do a red-carpet thing again, but I need to do something else that will have a different intellectual, emotional charge; something that will matter,

'People sometimes say, 'Are they laughing at us?' Or, 'Balenciaga is so cynical.' But it's not that at all. We're putting it out there because it feels relevant.'

Balenciaga line; that's clear from his shapes. And Raf has always said that there would be no Raf Simons without Helmut Lang.
I think acknowledging that is important. I hate how this industry rips off each other, often in a bad way, and then pretends not to see it. For me, it was quite a struggle from the very beginning. My connection to this enigmatic heritage of Margiela, which I learned on autopilot, was still so strong at the beginning of Vetements. I think it was my anger coming out about what I couldn't do there. Of course, if they *had* heard and seen me, I probably wouldn't be sitting here today. And there would have been no Vetements. When you have to suppress your ideas, it has to come out somewhere, and it came out with that 'project', which was how I

omnipresent figures, these politicians and bureaucrats. I know you have spent half your life in the West, but I wondered if growing up in a former Soviet state gave you a special insight into this reality?
I do think there is a link to my upbringing and how I was taught about the Western world and capitalism in general, from a very critical point of view. I remember seeing a Coke can for the first time and thinking it was a nuclear bomb. They really brainwashed us into being suspicious and critical of all that. I guess that's something that stays with you. For that show, I looked at pictures of Angela Merkel, for example, and the style of her suits. We used the same photographer who made Merkel's election pictures for our campaign.

People sometimes say, 'Are they

too. That's where I complicate my life, I have to say. I do it because I love it, but then it becomes always harder. But then I always have this here [gestures toward the salon]. I feel, OK, couture anchors me once a year.

I'm very curious about what you'll see in the December show. I'm trying to time-travel now, to bring the influences that I love in fashion, like the 1990s, when people used to dress up for shows. But there is always an area where you can go next.

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With Gvasalia, everything is always more complex, more surprising than one might at first suppose. The 1990s show became a full-on video production directed by Harmony Korine over

several days in mid-November in Paris with an audience of extras decked out in 1990s gear and a backstage filled, typically for that time, with cigarette smoke. The concept was 'the lost season' – Autumn 1997, when the House of Balenciaga did not produce a collection. The designer Josephus Thimister had just departed after five years as creative director, and Ghesquière had not yet taken over. So this was Gvasalia's very imaginative take on that missing season, in an era when shows were still small, people dressed up, and smart phones unheard of. And, no, the collection – released digitally on December 8 – was not intended to reflect on Thimister's contribution or anticipate Ghesquière's. 'Not at all,' Gvasalia told me. 'I did what I love about the 1990s.'

who would change my life. He came to Paris three days later, and he never left.

My husband saved me in a way because he showed me how to love myself. Which I struggled to know before. You need to love yourself first to be able to love someone else. That I learned thanks to him. It's our wedding anniversary today; we're going for a romantic dinner.

You've lived in Switzerland for a while, near Zurich. What prompted that move? Was it partly for tax reasons.
Actually, I was looking for safety. I had a lot of problems here in Paris. It's a very xenophobic place to live, in a way. When my husband and I got together, we didn't want to live in Paris. It's OK for work, but I don't want to live here. I also like the mountains – I really need

that is not a conventional fashion hub, and who don't feel safe to be fully themselves?
That's a hard question. If I look at myself, having lived in those kinds of places, I never tried to blend in. I always accepted who I was in a way that was sometimes dangerous for me, but it made me happy. And I think that's the most important thing. You have to accept who you are and not be ashamed of that. Nobody should be able to tell us how we should be.

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A recurring motif in Demna's story is leaving: leaving the Soviet world for the West, leaving his father's expectations of a suitable career for the dream of fashion, leaving one design job for a bet-

Raf Simons, who watched the Balenciaga [couture] show online, told me that Gvasalia is 'the most modern designer there is right now.'

You've mentioned your husband during our conversations. Many people know him through his music as BFRND. How did you two meet?
I met him on Facebook, actually. I saw the music videos he did with his garage band back then, and I love music. I love what he did, and I felt that I needed to tell him. I texted him and he texted me back, and we started our exchange basically about music. He didn't know what I did. He wasn't so into fashion. We got to know each other first on the phone and on the Internet. This was the end of 2015, and we met in London in 2016, the day after my birthday, on March 26. I have never been so nervous to meet someone. It's like when you know something is going to happen. I was so nervous, and then he walked in, and I kind of lost it. I knew that this was someone

the nature and the snow. Basically, Switzerland was on the list for those reasons, and also the safety. God knows, what's going on in Europe politically. And taxes are lower than anywhere else in Europe – that wasn't the primary reason, but it was important.

Do you like living there?
I don't like being in Zurich and we're planning to move. We realized we need to be in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. We speak French at home, and we're thinking one day about having a kid. We're looking into moving near Montreux. But I do love living there, the proximity to everything and the amount of nature.

Finally, what advice would you give to young people, living in a city or town

ter one, and of course, leaving France for the security and quiet of Switzerland. He also expresses a wariness of staying too long in fashion, as though he knows it will almost certainly lead to parody – a once-hot designer 'still doing that bomber jacket in a gay club' – and he talks in earnest about wanting to direct other creative projects, like a music video. Yet the thought that I had during our sessions was that Demna has only now, with this remarkable year, truly begun to feel like the artist that he undoubtedly is. I mean, he has finally experienced that incredible satisfaction that makes all the nonsense and all the hours worthwhile. That's what the people in the George V salons and on his comic red carpet understood: a great artist was in the house. No, you get the feeling that Demna is only just beginning.

‘We’ve created our own rules.’

Balenciaga CEO Cédric Charbit and Demna Gvasalia on turning a marginal vision into mainstream success.

By Jonathan Wingfield

Since he became Balenciaga's CEO in 2016, Cédric Charbit has been on a stealth mission: transform the vision of Demna Gvasalia – a creative director arguably more comfortable when operating in the margins – into mainstream global success.

With Gvasalia often working from his adopted hometown of Zurich and Charbit in Balenciaga's Parisian headquarters, the pair have built a relationship they describe as based on mutual trust around a simple ritual: a weekly call. 'Just the two of us, tête-à-tête,' says Charbit. 'When we are able to talk openly about things.'

Charbit himself has spent his entire career at Kering, beginning at the luxury group – then called PPR – as a young buyer for Printemps department store in Paris. After rising through the ranks, he was appointed executive vice president of product and marketing at Saint Laurent in May 2016. Within six months, he was offered the role of CEO at Balenciaga and jumped at the chance.

Since then, he has overseen an almost complete transformation of the company's internal organization, including the absorption of the entire merchandising department into the design studio, while balancing the sometimes-competing pressures of creative vision and commercial reality. The result has been a remarkable increase not only in the brand's revenue, but also its image and status. Under his watch, Balenciaga has once again become what Charbit believes it should always be: 'groundbreaking, innovative, pushing the norms.'

System spoke to Charbit and Gvasalia at Balenciaga's Rue de Sèvres headquarters about the pair's learning curve, the challenge of implementing a powerful and singular vision, and ensuring that everything is infallibly 'brand right'.

Were you a straight-A student, rebel or slacker at school?

Demna Gvasalia: I was always a straight-A student. Best in class, worked a lot, and always felt that I needed to prove to my parents that I was good enough. I guess that was my distorted idea of deserving love – and I don't know whether that translates into 'straight-A' or 'gay-A' – but I was always the eccentric weirdo who was good at studying, who didn't fit into any group, and who didn't have a lot of friends. There was a rebellious side to me too, though: I'd wear pants that were cropped or worn low on the waist, which was considered to be too unacceptably 'Western' for the Soviet school system. If they could see your socks it meant you were trying to be like Michael Jackson, and the school would call my parents to say they should stop spreading capitalist values; values which, of course, I really admired. So when I got in trouble, it was always dress code related.

Cédric Charbit: I was a very good pupil at school, no real surprises there. I started my schooling in a very bourgeois setting, but then my family's financial situation changed. When that happened I was able to get a scholarship, which meant I could continue my studies, and I'm really grateful that the French system allowed me to get ahead. That wouldn't have been possible otherwise, especially in an industry like fashion, which isn't known for being inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds or who come through scholarships.

Demna: I knew that if I wanted to get somewhere – and get out of the system – I needed to be as good as I possibly could in whatever I was doing. Escape as motivation was the mindset: to get somewhere you need to work hard.

How did you express your creativity when you were a teenager?

Demna: I experimented a lot with what I was wearing, and I was making clothes for myself. Then people like my mum's friends or the cool guys in the neighbourhood would be like, 'Hey, I like your pants, can you make some for me?' So I started to make clothes for other people, as well as customizing things. I still do this now actually; I still cut up things to make new things.

What informed your understanding of glamour or what an aspirational lifestyle could look like?

Demna: Being able to live with your own identity, being different. I hate the word 'glamour'; I always did, maybe because I didn't grow up aspiring to the glamour and sparkle of Hollywood. I never dreamed of having that life, of socializing, going to dinners or cocktail parties, it never interested me. I don't know why, maybe because I didn't see enough of it as a kid to be inspired by it. But I always dreamed of the freedom to be who you are, without being judged. That's still difficult in society today but it's still my aspirational lifestyle.

The pursuit of freedom.

Demna: Absolutely, and the way I dress. People are sometimes scared of my look, my silhouette. They judge me on that because they're not able to categorize me, like, 'What the fuck! Who is this guy?' The other day I went to the Maison du Caviar restaurant with a friend here in Paris. I never really go to those 'chic' places – I mostly cook at home – and they didn't want to let me in because of the way I was dressed. They were like, 'Chez nous, c'est pas possible!' I was like [incredulous], '*Pardon*?'

What were you wearing?

Demna: Head-to-toe Balenciaga! Had the other person I was with not said, 'It's OK; he's with us', they wouldn't have let me in. That's the story of my life – I don't fit in. People who go to 'chic' places like that don't have the freedom to look the way they want and I think my career will always be dedicated to proving the opposite.

Did you feel uncomfortable once you'd made it into the Maison du Caviar?

Demna: Yes, but the owner of the place later joined us at the table and I complained to him, saying, 'What the fuck? You should explain to your staff that we're in 2021 and they shouldn't judge people by their silhouette.' It's like this everywhere. [Sighs] Unless they know who I am – Demna, creative director at Balenciaga – they won't let me in. But the moment they know that, the way I choose to look suddenly becomes acceptable. That's what's so unfair. I hate that, and I don't want to be a part of it. I'll never be hungry enough to have to wear a tuxedo to eat. I'd be happier going to McDonalds wearing my rubber boots. That is *my* aspirational lifestyle – just to be who I am.

Risk-taking seems so naturally embedded in Balenciaga right now. Tell me about a significant risk you took in your life, and how it panned out?

Cédric: I actually want to talk about a day when Demna and I were chatting and he mentioned a traditional Russian saying: 'If you don't take risks, you don't drink Champagne.'

Demna: Russian motivational sayings are generally alcohol related. [Laughs] Although I should add that that's not *actually* my life motto!

You haven't got it tattooed, have you?

Demna: [Laughs] No, good idea though.

Cédric: But that motto nicely summarizes how, since I met Demna, my attitude to risk – certainly professional risk – has changed. I remember a WhatsApp message I sent to Demna when we'd just started working together. It read: 'I am sharing the risk with you.' And he answered, 'OK, thanks, but just so you know, this isn't a risk.' That helped me to understand that the right decisions *are* risky, and the more you risk, the more you gain. I found this new perspective enriching because I'm naturally quite risk adverse. So, with Demna, I've learned to expect the unexpected. And that is what works: to accept being open to doing things that are innovative and unprecedented, which by definition is risky.

Demna: I remember that WhatsApp message. It was all part of how we were building our relationship, because one generally doesn't share those kinds of values straight away. Cédric was very open from the beginning, though. Risk taking is just part of my character; I grew up that way. I don't think it's what I'd call 'intellectual' risk taking, which can be quite scary when you overthink things. It's more intuitive or impulsive; you just know something's right, even if everyone else thinks you're crazy.

Can you give me an example?

Demna: I had a great job, but I had a feeling I had to do something else, so one day I just quit. All my family and friends were saying, 'You're crazy. You'll end up jobless. You want to do your own project [Vetements], but no one needs it.' I ignored those negative intellectual aspects completely because I knew deep down I had to do it. It didn't even feel like a risk; I knew it was the right thing to do. And here at Balenciaga it is like that sometimes on a corporate level. It might be like, 'Oh my God, what are we doing here?', but the brand is big enough to be aware of that risk. That's also how you grow, evolve, have your own unique identity.

Cédric: And that is what's so inspiring.

Demna: Risk-taking always has a negative connotation, but it is also very hopeful. You can discover new things which, from a creative point of view, can be hard to do. It's much easier to stay in your comfort zone and stagnate.

When I interviewed [then Louis Vuitton CEO] Yves Carcelle, he said that he was a natural-born entrepreneur, already selling marbles at primary

'I'd wear pants that were cropped to try to be like Michael Jackson. But the school would call my parents to say stop spreading capitalist values.'

'My parents had a lot of retail ventures, including a Céline franchise store. As a teenager I used to run that store at weekends and during the holidays.'

school. What about you, Cédric?
Cédric: Before they went bankrupt, my parents were entrepreneurs who had a lot of retail ventures, and among them was a Céline franchise store in Toulouse. As a teenager I used to run that store during the holidays and on the weekends. I was barely 15 but I already had a team working with me. I say this because I really felt that I was a born entrepreneur; it was always in me. I always wanted that, and it absolutely defines me. And then I met Demna.

What changed?
Cédric: In January 2018, Demna and I did an interview together for the *Financial Times*, and the journalist Jo Ellison wrote something like, 'After meeting with these two, you wonder who the strongest businessman in the room is.' as that might sound, it is true. I started my career at Parisian department store Printemps, which was part of Kering – PPR at the time – and the Pinault family was already the owner. It was my first job and I remember very clearly the moments when Pinault family members spoke to collaborators such as myself. I mean, I started as an intern, then became a buyer; I was really entry-level. I always found them to be inspiring, and they gave me a vision of luxury and entrepreneurship that I found fascinating and innovative. Things such as sustainability and proximity management came very early on, as did the intention to genuinely 'create' brands rather than simply developing them.

Was there any advice that they gave you in particular?

'I once sent Demna a WhatsApp which read: 'I'm sharing the risk with you.' And he replied, 'OK, thanks, but just so you know, this isn't a risk."

That got me thinking, because she was quite right: with Demna, there are lots of things that have inspired me – about taking risks, but also about being an entrepreneur.

Cédric, Demna has often cited Martin Margiela from a creative standpoint, but who did you look up to in terms of innovative leadership and business management earlier in your career?
Cédric: It's a cliché, but I'd say Apple. The products, the people, the decisions, the aesthetics, the concepts: it all inspired me, like it did my entire generation. As a brand and a culture, Apple has reached a level of modernity, innovation and excellence that I find very inspiring. As for a person or particular group of people, it would be the Pinault family. As predictable

Cédric: In general, there are people who talk a lot but inspire very little, then others who speak less but are very inspirational. There are members of the Pinault family with whom I have had only a handful of conversations, but they've made a real impact on me. They saw me in a way that I never thought anyone would ever see me.

I remember speaking with people at Balenciaga from the late 1990s through to about 2012, and thinking that while there was real creative ambition, the company itself seemed like a pretty bare-bones operation. Demna, did you immediately sense the potential the house had to become the size and scale it is today?
Demna: Intellectually, I didn't have any expectations. I would have been too scared to take on the responsibility if I had, and to be honest I didn't have much confidence in myself back then. The idea of how far any project I'm working on can go never crosses my mind. For me, it's the opposite: 'At what point do you have to become conscious of whether it's already gone too far?' My only preoccupation when I came here was building the creative vision and trying to modernize the aesthetic that could fit into the heritage while also being my own story. There was no masterplan, like, 'Right, I want to create a sneaker…' It just came naturally because I didn't have any expectations, and I didn't feel there was expectation placed on me either. I felt genuinely free, which as a creative is the ideal way of being at your best.
Cédric: I'd say there was a plan but there wasn't a plan. At the beginning, I had never been a CEO before and Demna had never held such a senior position in a company of this size, so we were in freestyle mode. It didn't take long to realize that the fit between Demna's creative vision and the brand, and the execution of the heritage done in his way, was a rare match. That alignment was what unlocked the potential. I often talk about the magnitude of the vision, and I'm conscious that a house meeting an artistic director who can bring such a strong, powerful and long-term vision doesn't always happen. I quickly realized how important it was to have a genuine exchange with Demna. From my perspective, I had accepted to run a company, of which I am the CEO, yet at the same time, I need to passionately and constantly *execute* [Demna's] vision. That is hard for directors to admit: you have a company, a team, you make the decisions – all the CEO clichés – but you also need to be able to execute a vision, when that vision is spot on and powerful. My role is to manage Balenciaga, but also to execute this vision. And the idea of executing something when you manage a company is sometimes taboo, but it's something I totally accept.
Demna: In relationships in a house like this, it is important that there is genuine trust between someone like Cédric and me. It needs to work together, not in parallel. It took us a while to understand and have confidence in one another, to be able to say, 'You have to trust my vision and I'll trust yours.' Obviously it is not *always* fluid, but it has become more fluid over time, like in every relationship you build. Cédric is a very talented businessman and visionary, and I really recognize that, even more over time. It works both ways, too: he has seen where the vision or the ideas I have might be going, even when those ideas might be a bit, 'What the hell?'

You mean, too extreme?
Demna: …or maybe just out of the comfort zone. That can be hard if you don't have trust. I'm very Russian in my way of saying things; I am very direct. We had to find a healthy way of communicating, but I always felt the moment would come when I could trust Cédric. That is what we have worked on in our 'professional couple relationship'; we have learned to trust each other's visions, which is lucky because it's rare.
Cédric: It's a combination of getting to know one another, working together, having success, having relative failures. That can only happen over time. I know how lucky we are, especially when you consider that some of the important duos in fashion have also shared a private life.

Tell me about your first proper meeting together.
Cédric: It was a lunch, and Demna brought along a list of about 10 points; a mix of ideas and questions, like a to-do list. It was brilliant to see his intelligence and lucidity about the situation. And I was like, 'OK, wow…'
Demna: Did you keep those questions?
Cédric: Yes, I still have them.

And has everything on that list now been ticked off?

'The other day I went to the Maison du Caviar but they wouldn't let me in because of the way I was dressed. Like, '*Chez nous, c'est pas possible*!"

Cédric: I think so. Every time we talk, there's always a solution, but it's important not to confuse the word 'problem' with something new. Being innovative brings things that are beyond the comfort zone, but that's not a problem.

But within all of this, there remains ego. How does that get put aside when you receive a to-do list?
Demna: I don't think my list was based on ego. I don't remember those exact 'ten commandments', but I'm pretty sure they were based on the problematics of how the brand could develop. I don't see myself as a businessman. I make a product that someone has to pay money for at the end of the day, but I have had situations in my career where ego became such an obstacle that it destroyed a lot of stuff. I never felt this from Cédric. In building our relationship, I always felt that the ego was somewhere else, but never in-between us.

Cédric, was it necessary to change the business model or management approach as radically as Demna was reinventing the creative proposition?
Cédric: When I first arrived I met the management team – about a dozen people – and each person told me a story about Balenciaga, none of which was the same. It wasn't that they didn't *like* Balenciaga, but I quickly realized that they weren't aligned in a shared project, and that this lack of alignment between the individuals would be problematic.

Why? Because of the extent to which Demna was reinventing the brand's creative vision?
Cédric: Demna's ideas to transform Balenciaga have been really strong – our aesthetic, our scale and our business culture have all changed. The execution of this vision has been achieved because it has had to be done *collectively*. You often get executives who are highly skilled and talented, but they can be too focused on leadership and autonomy. If you have a vision that's right for the brand, then you have to come together. There's Demna's creative vision but there was a business vision, too: the number of collections, the schedule, the unification of genders, the development of menswear…

Demna, it's interesting to hear Cédric talk about implementing necessary structural changes. To what extent if any were you involved in this?

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Demna: I remember my first meeting – this was before Cédric joined – with the menswear team at their office on Rue du Cherche-Midi. I didn't know them at all as it was only my second day here. It was *the* most depressing experience I've ever had in fashion: they had seven boards with technical sketches that had been given to them by the commercial team to execute, and that was their collection. And I was like, 'But where is your vision, guys? Do you actually like any of this?' And they were all like, 'No, we hate it, but that's what we have to do.' I just said, [incredulous] '*What*? You *have* to do this? But you're designers – you're creatives.' I came out of the room thinking [sighs], 'What the hell. What can we do when the system is so wrong? If the direction comes from the other end – the commercial team – then it'll never be a desirable product. We'll never be able to develop a proper menswear line in this house, if this is how it works.'

So you had to break it and start again.

Demna: Yes, completely. I felt like we started the menswear line from scratch – from the structural point of view through to the vision – until we fused it with the women's, and it became one thing. Men's, women's, we don't even have separate designers any more; everyone does everything. And they love it, too. Designers don't like to be put in those boxes, like, 'You only do knitwear for women.'

Was that a culture shock for some people or was everyone immediately liberated and onboard?

Demna: The people who found it a culture shock are no longer here. And thank God for that because we needed open-minded people. I probably now have the most open-minded team ever! We're used to these things: men's and women's together, only doing two collections, we split them in four and they love that, too. We've managed to create our own rules, ones that are good for us.

Cédric, what was your first impression when Demna showed you the Triple S sneaker? Did you genuinely see it as an instant hit? And given its success, how tempting is it to say to Demna, 'More, more, more of the same please'?

Cédric: It's always more, more, more of the same! I am that kind of guy. Demna is the one who sometimes says less is more – for the best. As for the Triple S, I arrived in early December 2016, and about six weeks later this shoe was first presented on almost every look at the men's show. I am supposed to have a commercial eye, or at least an eye for what will be successful, but I didn't feel that when I first saw the shoe – and I don't mind saying so. The question I asked myself was, 'Is this a bestseller or not?' Which I now realize was the wrong question. This job is more about asking if a product that Demna has proposed is what I call 'brand right'. Does it fit the vision? Is it groundbreaking, innovative?

Demna: Maybe you didn't see the potential, but what did you think about a sneaker being part of the brand vocabulary? There are two things here: the aesthetic idea that the Triple S would be considered too big and too extreme for the time, but also the idea of having a sneaker in the collection was… because I don't think you were too attached to that idea.

Cédric: Is having a sneaker in a show right? Yes, great. Is it brand right? Yes, because it's pushing the norms, and *literally* pushing the volumes, which is very Balenciaga. Everything was revolutionary about it, everything *screamed* Balenciaga, and was utterly brand right, but instead we asked ourselves if it was a bestseller. That said, the price was very high for the time.

Demna: We couldn't even produce it.

Cédric: Then again, I did find the concept of having couture elements and streetwear elements together for this house very seductive, because in that show there was also beautiful tailoring. I felt very confident about that. I quickly sensed the infatuation that people had for the shoe; it was then my job to execute the vision and make sure that it was a success. Another point, with both Balenciaga and with Demna: I realized that there was a different approach to what we call in the industry 'timeless', and how to elaborate the heritage, the archives, the traditions of a house. It's almost the opposite with Balenciaga. Demna innovates, and his innovative products *become* timeless.

They become instant classics.

Demna: Not instant, it takes some time. These days, it's less of a big deal, but back then when we launched the Triple S, it was a very different sneaker silhouette. Whether that is considered an ugly sneaker or not is just a question of taste. I personally think there are many far uglier sneakers out there! But back then it was so new that it took some time… now it is a kind of timeless product within our context here.

Cédric: That's what's interesting about our approach – we're defining these products that *will* become timeless rather than looking back at previously timeless products. I think that's a very intelligent vision, and with Demna's work, it's always, 'What is the concept, what's the message, what are we doing?' And I realized that this creative approach was a new way of generating timeless products.

Demna, you've had these big hits with sneakers, bags, the collabs, the shows, and so on. Does this success motivate you, make you feel more confident? Or does it add further pressure to maintain the success, to replicate those previous hits?

Demna: Interestingly, I never thought about it as pressure, because I have recognized the importance of accepting failure, while you innovate. Failure is great; we need to be able to fail to create something new and we need to expect to fail along the way. I don't feel like every product we work on is going to be a hit. In fact, it will never work if you try to plan that, and say to yourself, 'We need to make a new sneaker like this or like that', somehow trying to follow a recipe. That's just going to become an intellectual exercise, one that won't come from your actual sense of aesthetics. The Triple S is one example, but we have a lot of other products that we have recently worked on or are currently working on that were not meant to be conceived at all. I do feel free from any obligation to create hit products. It is actually the opposite, because within that process of failure there is always a hit product that just comes. Because it's a good idea, a good product, because it has an identity. That is the magic of creativity: you just keep doing what you do, without creating this frame of 'I need to deliver something'. The moment I start doing that, I'll become a worse designer.

Does that culture of embracing failure extend to the whole creative team?

Demna: A lot of people are fearless, but they *are* often afraid. Sometimes it is just pragmatic, like, 'We're doing all this, but maybe it won't work.' But I don't think about all that. Whenever I believe in an idea 95%, then I just want to execute it so I can see if it works or not. I think I have a trustworthy filter, because if I love something, then I feel there is a reason for it to be within my vision. After that we'll see, maybe other people won't like it at all. For example, this boot I'm wearing today [points to black oversized chunky rubber boot] I'm not sure more than five people liked it. [Laughs]. But for me it was something that I felt was right to exist within my vision, and that's how I function. If I spend more than 10 minutes on thinking whether a product is good or not then I just drop it, because it means that I'm forcing it. More than 10 minutes is too long.

Cédric, your heritage is as a businessman. So how does that conversation between you the entrepreneur and Demna the disruptive creative libertine work out? When and how does the inherent conflict become harmonious, and when does it not resolve itself?

Cédric: Demna and I have an ongoing dialogue that's between just the two of us, *tête-à-tête*, when we are able to talk openly about things. Most times it is fluid, sometimes it isn't. But overall, I've never experienced anything like it before. And for that, I feel extremely grateful. Yes, I am a businessman, but I quickly realized that my capacities, in regards to Demna and his generation, are a bit obsolete. And that's important to acknowledge, because I believe Demna – like certain other designers – has great merchandising skills. The best merchandiser in the room is always Demna… no offence, Demna. Of course, it's my job to highlight market-related or product-related issues to Demna – as and when, if any, and at the right moment.

Do you talk to Demna about purely creative things?

Cédric: All the time. And does Demna talk to me about business? All the time.

Demna: I think over time we have figured out our territories and we don't cross the frontiers, which can be very dangerous in these industries.

Cédric: I know when to stop and so does he. Something else that's very important to point out is that Demna's design department has absorbed the merchandising department.

Demna: Cédric was really open to that, because we'd had a lot of issues with the merchandising department not really working harmoniously with the design

'I think over time we've figured out our respective territories and we don't cross the frontiers, which can be very dangerous in these industries.'

'Cédric says, 'Demna, think about the customer. Sure, create a denim jacket that swings slightly to the back, but don't make it be completely upside down."

department, and kind of existing in two parallel worlds. That can be a problem because merchandisers have their own vision, which is very market and statistics based – and which is never in line with the creative department, especially if those creatives are innovative – because it is only based on what sells. That's what it is like for our competitors, but somehow Balenciaga is standalone in that respect, because we cover so many different customers – from sneakers to couture.

So you brought the teams together?
Demna: I suggested we fuse them, and have the merchandisers more involved in the process of creation. They pretty much know now what we're doing from the very first product we make, which allows them to come up with propositions and solutions that complete the product offer at the end. So we work for six months on a season and the merchandisers will say, 'We have an idea for the shoe you're working on; maybe we should have a sandal [version] of it, too.' That conversation is now part of the process; it's constant.
Cédric: And it works for us. Not just the creativity, but our product offer, too. Is it high level and efficient? Yes, it's one of the best in the industry, if not *the* best.
Demna: In response to what Cédric mentioned before about me being a great merchandiser. Personally, I don't see myself as a businessman, but I *am* a consumer; maybe an extreme version of a Balenciaga consumer, because I am inside the brand. But the brand has grown so much and the range of customers who really desire the product is so much broader, and this is where Cédric comes in. I've learned a lot from those balanced propositions based on a mix of the products – some more extreme than others.

So, compromise becomes the fundamental condition.
Cédric: Well, if your ego isn't in the room, you have no fear, and if you're not corporate driven, then you can have faith in the vision and believe it'll work. I think it's one of our best decisions and has proven to be really successful.
Demna: It doesn't happen overnight, but you can see it is efficient. And for me, this is a Balenciaga model that we have created. So the creative and the business sides have become aligned. I can't say that happens all the time, that is part of a compromise, too.
Cédric: And while Demna's feedback is constructive and solution driven I also have to be ready for a 'no'.
Demna: But it's not my ego saying no. I have to know when something might devalue the brand, and make Balenciaga *less* Balenciaga. I think knowing that makes it easier to accept this.

What percentage of the more 'extreme' products now gets cut?
Demna: It's more a question of how can we make some of the more difficult ideas more relatable for a general customer – and not just for a fashion victim like me – while not watering them down.

Did the boots you're wearing start out like that or have they become more palatable since the original design?
Demna: This particular one is hard to make less like it is; some ideas *should* only exist in a small number for a small number of customers, like myself. I mean I call myself a fashion victim because I don't have that filter of what is too much. There is nothing too much for me in the way I dress but I am aware that we are addressing people who cannot go that far. And that is when Cédric says, 'Think about the customer, think about your mum' – who loves fashion by the way. So, you know, create a denim jacket that might swing slightly to the back, but don't make it be completely upside down.
Cédric: Demna's mum is often part of the conversation!
Demna: This is the way I work though, not just with the designers but with anyone on the team. I often ask people what they think – it could be an intern or a design assistant – their status on the team doesn't matter. They're all pretty outspoken, like, 'This is something I'd wear, this is too much for me', and very often I will change my idea based on what they say. I just want the best idea. For me, this is the most natural way to work, with the ego waiting over there, on the sofa. It's not only working with Cédric; it's on every level. You'd be surprised how many people have much better ideas than I do.

How do you navigate asking four different design assistants and getting four strong and opposing opinions?
Demna: Sometimes it is just good to hear the opinions, because everyone is a potential customer. I'm like an anthropologist when it comes to making clothes, and I need those opinions.

'I am supposed to have an eye for what will be successful, but I didn't feel that when I first saw the Triple S shoe – and I don't mind saying so.'

Sometimes the opinions are quite *nul*, but that's good, too; it's the same desire to fail in order to create. They often have great ideas that immediately replace mine, because they're just stronger or speak to more people or are more immediate, and that is something I've learned to use to our advantage.

Cédric, without wanting to patronise him, does Demna need protecting?
Cédric: I think part of my role *is* to protect Demna; he is constantly being solicited, and the stakes are very, very high. When there's a show or a presentation, whatever is written or commented on can be powerful in good and bad ways. In the modern world I think it's important to have a protective and caring discourse. It isn't something paternal, we just support each other.
Demna: It's not protection from people being critical about what I'm doing; that's something I'm used to. [To Cédric] But I *do* feel protected by you because if I'm heading in the wrong direction you let me know in a very gentle way, not being like, 'What the hell are you doing here?' That's what I feel I need, and without it, I'd feel very alone in this house.

Demna, I interviewed you the night before your first-ever Balenciaga show, and the thing I remember most was how calm you seemed. You even mentioned that you'd been ready for four days, and that the atelier team were getting stressed out because there wasn't any stress.
Demna: They didn't like it, they were suspicious. They thought I'd come in and change everything at the last minute!

Are you still as organized and stress-free these days?
Demna: I think I am even more organized! Structurally, we have grown; we have incredible technicians working for us, so the collection is ready almost two weeks before. There are retouches, but we never change the whole jacket. Also, I'm pretty clear from the beginning of the season about what we'll work on, so there are no last-minute surprises. It's never like, 'Oh, I just watched *Squid Game* and now I want to do red overalls.' I don't want to have any fashion drama in the last two days. That's not what I thrive on; it doesn't make me come up with better ideas if I do. I'm not like those musicians who need to be depressed to create great music. After this interview I'm going downstairs to do the styling of the Fall 2022 collection; we'll play some music, and everyone will have fun. This is the Balenciaga way of working: it is the combination and the credibility of the team, but it's also a very clear and defined vision that doesn't require the fashion drama of the 1990s, with everyone running around screaming.

Balenciaga was recently described as operating almost like a media company. Do you ever sense that there is a risk the clothes will become secondary to the spectacle and sheer amount of 'activity'? Does that even matter?
Demna: It matters a lot. As long as I am here the clothes will never be secondary to anything else; they are the essence and driving force of the brand. The outside world might perceive what we do as a media strategy, but really it is just about discovering other ways of communicating the vision and creating products that are fun. Personally, I'd be bored to death by now, going to the same location to see yet another fashion show, and this is why during the pandemic, we had to discover other ways, whether *The Simpsons* or *Fortnite*. It could look almost like show business in some way, but fashion has become that, and is actually more powerful than some parts of show business. There are so many people following what we do these days – being a part of it or hating it – and that's because fashion *is* part of the media today. But I feel fashion can move even further forward, staying exciting and relevant and creating moments of 'what's next'. I always want to know what's next, that is how fashion becomes entertainment.

Lastly, which *Simpsons* character do you most identify with?
Demna: That is the hardest question today! I have to think about that… probably a combined and genderless version of Bart and Lisa.

What would the hair look like?
Demna: A bit punky, a mohawk maybe. Bart, because I have fun getting into trouble, and then Lisa because of being the straight-A nerd. And maybe a bit of Maggie, too, just observing things, a wannabe anthropologist. That's basically my own character in life.

And you, Cédric?
Cédric: Well, Demna just gave me my own *Simpsons* character this season. That is my life achievement – it doesn't get better.

'This is the most natural way to work, with the ego waiting over there, on the sofa. You'd be surprised how many people have much better ideas than I do.'

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Martina Tiefenthaler

'We're celebrating our 10-year anniversary,' says Martina Tiefenthaler of her creative partnership with Demna Gvasalia. Originally from Austria, Tiefenthaler first met Gvasalia in 2011, when she joined Maison Margiela's then bare-bones design team as his intern, before becoming his assistant, and finally, his right hand. She has remained Gvasalia's closest collaborator since his appointment as Balenciaga's artistic director in October 2015 and the pair's invaluable working relationship has defined much of the house's seismic creative transformation.

Tiefenthaler's work with Gvasalia in the early days at Vetements helped establish the brand foundations of the collective-cum-fashion-label that brought him to the attention of the industry, clued-up consumers, and ultimately the Kering Group who saw his potential for Balenciaga. The experience and knowledge she gained in those different roles helped sharpen what she calls her '360 point of view', the default setting she uses when co-piloting the creative fortunes of a cutting-edge fashion brand, no matter its scale or heritage. Today, under the loftier title of Balenciaga's chief creative officer, Martina's responsibilities appear seemingly endless, which is how she likes it. Her mission, she says with characteristic aplomb, is simply to make the house 'creatively better, conceptually better, commercially better'.

System caught up with Martina as she completed a busy day of Balenciaga fittings, to discuss her love of 'very tight or very baggy' clothes, balancing financial success with material waste, and her decade and counting alongside one of today's most wildly creative minds.

We're in Balenciaga's Parisian HQ, housed in a former hospital building which dates back to 1632. How does it feel to work in this kind of setting?
Martina Tiefenthaler: I always say to Demna that it's really bizarre that we are in such an historical place when our job is to think into the future and be completely without boundaries. It creates an interesting tension. And because the building is protected, we couldn't change the colour of the windows, the doorknobs or anything else; we even had to get approval to change the colour of the carpet in this room [to bright red].

Do the historical surroundings intensify the desire to create the avant-garde?
I've thought about that in the past. I guess this building manifests something that defines so much of Paris. When I leave here and walk the old streets back to my house, which is in a building from 1808, the weight of history is *everywhere*. And that can make things a little difficult for us on a practical level: we do fittings in a room that has pretty low ceilings, so you're sometimes craving for air. I'm lucky though, because when we go to work in Zurich, where Demna lives, it's in a totally different environment. The [studio] building is from the 1960s, lots of glass, and overlooking a lake; it's as open as this one is enclosed.

How often are you there?
It depends on where we are on the collection. Today, for example, we're doing fittings with the models, which we only ever do in Paris, never in Zurich. But generally speaking I would say it could be between one to three times a month, with each trip lasting two to five days. Outside of Covid, I spend about 80 working days there a year; it's a lot.

Is that disruptive or just normal now?
It's not normal, but I do like it, because I need to get out of Paris regularly. I came here 10 years ago for work, not necessarily because I adore the city, and it is still difficult for me now. Life in Paris is very different to how I see the world, my organization, my ideas of how to be social, so I feel lucky that my work takes me elsewhere. The seasonal schedule dictates where I am and when, so that can sometimes be difficult on a personal level. You know, I miss out on birthdays, and I have trouble keeping up my sports routine. But I'm from Austria and my mum's house is only 10 minutes from Switzerland; you can see the Swiss and Austrian mountains from it.

Talking of family life in Austria, what was the first thing in pop or visual culture that you discovered for yourself, that hadn't just been handed down from your parents or elder siblings?
I had trouble finding that by myself because I have two older siblings, both of whom were strong role models in my life. I got quite confused between looking up to my sister, who's 12 years older than me, and my brother who's 7 years older than me, and then my peers.

'Demna was the first person I worked with: I was his intern at Margiela, then his assistant, then his right hand. Those early years were an extension of school.'

But I look back now and think that was quite useful, because even today I have a very 360 point of view; I think you can see that in our collections because we get inspiration from all over. There were multiple things I was hooked on as a teenager: hip-hop culture from my brother, and then snowboarding, because I am from the mountains, so we do a lot of sport.

What about clothes?
At one point I was dressing far more like a boy compared to the other girls – like, oversized snowboarding clothes. I never felt comfortable in clothes that had a 'normal' fit, and even today I don't feel very confident in them because I don't think it fits my silhouette. What I prefer is either very tight or very big – hiding in baggy or exposing things.

the projection of an image?
It was all of that. Even when I was small, before each new school year, my mum would buy me some new looks. I vividly remember getting home from the shopping trip and playing store in my bedroom: pretending to scan the labels with my calculator. I just liked *everything* about clothing: understanding the volumes, dressing, pleating, arranging them properly at home, choosing what types of hangers… Friends would make fun of me because the closet in my little bedroom was so neat. I wanted it to look like a clothing store.

Were you making clothes, too?
My mum taught me how to knit and sew very early; I learned it from her before they taught me in school. I would make fabric bags or little pouches, not clothing but more like accessories. The pattern-making I learned later.

How did you discover fashion – brand labels, the industry, fashionable clothes?
When I was young, my sister moved to Munich and was buying Jil Sander, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dolce & Gabbana – the kind of brands I would never have known being in the Austrian countryside. That helped me understand that there was more to clothes than just business dressing or hip-hop, and I guess I wanted to be like my sister.

What were your first steps towards working in fashion? Did you study it?
Yes, my training was in fashion design. I always knew I was a creative person but the nearest university to home only offered one creative class, which was architecture, so I started studying that; also because my sister is an interior designer and her husband is an architect. I only did one year though.

So many fashion designers dropped out of architecture studies!
It's crazy, yes. I was like, 'I can't build a house! It takes forever to dig a hole in the ground!' The professors told me I was so textiles-based in my approach, but I never knew what they meant. Then I figured maybe something more in the direction of fashion could be more suitable. I moved to Munich, spent a year doing internships for a fashion PR agency and the styling department of a German television channel. Then a year studying communication design in a school that combined graphic design with fashion design. I learned about typography and layouts, but also sewing and fashion illustration. Then after that I was like, 'OK, I think it is fashion I want to do', so I applied to the University of Applied Arts in Vienna to study fashion design. I got in and since then I've been in fashion.

How long was there between you starting to work in the industry and first meeting Demna?
Demna was actually the first person I worked with. I ended up studying in Vienna for three years, but didn't finish, because I was so desperate to get into the actual work world. I started applying for design internships in Paris, the city of fashion. Maison Margiela was the only one that replied so I went for an interview and that's when I met Demna. I've been in Paris ever since.

'Some of the existing Balenciaga team were like, 'Who *are* these people? They're not experienced; they can only make hoodies with long sleeves."

That's quite Balenciaga, too.
It's funny because Demna is the same. As a teenager I was not so confident, and I was bullied for a while, too. So my search for an identity always drew me back to my parents. They had a business along with my grandparents, so when they weren't dressed for sports at the weekend – skiing or hiking – they were all dressed in business clothes; lots of tailoring, suiting and nice knits, and ties for the men. As a little girl I loved seeing my mum in a suit, with tights and nice shoes, and a bit of golden jewellery. It is a very deep memory for me, that idea of her as my working mum. And I still love that kind of dressing today.

When did your interest in clothes develop into styling and assembling looks on yourself? Was it really about

How was that Margiela experience alongside Demna?
I was immediately like, 'This is the place for me.' I was Demna's intern, then his assistant, then his right hand. The structure was tiny at the time – he had no real team – and we worked only on the women's show collection. But I think with him feeling so comfortable there, that's how I experienced it, too. We liked the history of the house, and the way Margiela's design codes at the time were easy for us to relate to. For me, those early years were an extension of school.

Did you recognize early on the ways in which the two of you were both similar to one another and different?
We have a good amount of overlap; we like and dislike the same things. But then I have my side and he has his, the two of which can be so far apart. But I would say these two individual and opposite sides are also complementary.

How would you define the two opposite sides?
It's something we both acknowledge without really discussingt it. When you think in terms of proportion and silhouette, that is where we are pretty much the same. But then I ask myself this a lot: am I sometimes the one who brings in something feminine that Demna doesn't have? Just a desire from a female point of view, and an understanding of how it feels to wear certain things. Then again, I don't know about that from a men's perspective, even though I have often worn menswear. Besides that, I also think I have a certain understanding of – it's such a horrible word – but of 'chicness' and quality, where I think Demna sometimes sees those things a bit differently.

What does Demna bring to your working process that you wouldn't bring yourself?
He'll have an idea that pushes me further that I normally would go, or in a different direction. If you look at the recent collections, we had all these 'used' effects, like the holes in the clothes – that is all Demna. He'll say, 'Let's destroy it', and I am like, 'Well, OK, but why would someone buy broken clothing?' [Laughs] But of course that's what I wear, too. And once he brings the idea to the table, I really know how to push it further, thanks to the opportunities we have here to work with expensive materials and the best manufacturers. So it is this dialogue where we bring in different points of view; there is an exchange.

What did you learn while working at Vetements that prepared you for Balenciaga?
I've never asked myself that question. I actually stopped working at Vetements quite early on to go work at Louis Vuitton. So my contribution was really at the beginning with Demna, kicking it off almost. For the first time, I truly understood what it meant to work 360, because we did *everything*; we chose the name, designed the logo, made the website, decided what the labels should look like, and that is exactly what I am doing at Balenciaga, too. So I think everything prepared me for this job now when I look back.

Vetements was about creating a world, whereas Balenciaga has been about reimagining a much bigger world that already existed. Did that feel like a big responsibility given the history of the house, or was it liberating, like, 'Wow we've got the keys to the castle here'?
It was such a mixed bag of emotions. I felt free and lucky; I felt enabled to do all those things beyond the collections themselves, to bring in the right people, to create teams and change structures.

That's a lot to consider, though.
The pressure was, and still is, full-on, and it is a weight on my shoulders. I just said to you before that all my previous working experiences were like school, and were preparing me for what I'm doing now at Balenciaga, but frankly nothing can prepare you for this!

What was it like when you first arrived at Balenciaga?
The company was much smaller when we arrived, but it had a rich history and heritage. A lot of the design team had been there for quite a while, before us joining, so we came in and people were like, 'Who *are* these people? They've not had much experience; they only make crazy hoodies with the sleeves too long.' So while arriving when we did felt liberating, extremely exciting and creatively *absolutely* fulfilling, it also felt like a lot of responsibility, a lot of pressure, and there were so many eyes on us, some of which probably wanted to see us fail. It was intense.

How did you go about shifting the working culture, the whole mentality? These things don't happen overnight.

'I've never felt comfortable in clothes that are a 'normal' fit; I prefer either very big or very tight – hiding in baggy or exposing. That's quite Balenciaga.'

It took us years, it didn't feel quick at all. Demna was the visionary leader, who I felt absolutely in sync with. I knew he relied on me and vice versa. But at the beginning he was still working at Vetements half the time, so I was often the one managing the Balenciaga teams. When it came to our designs though, I didn't require feedback, because I knew it was good. I don't want to sound arrogant, it's more confidence. I just saw it as my duty to push Demna's vision through until everyone was onboard.

What does Demna typically share with you as a starting point for the collection – an image, a WhatsApp message, a news story, a silhouette? Or is it the format of the actual show?
It's really case by case. There have been seasons when we prepared so far in advance; that came from Demna, who had this moment when he was like, 'OK, here are four or five themes for next the four or five collections.' We discussed it, and I added my input. And we gradually prepared those multiple ideas, throwing inspirational pictures into different boxes that matched each theme. Then there was another time when Demna said, 'I really want a show on water.' The show was also inspired by nuns' clothing and so all those different elements came together.

Is there a constant dialogue between you and Demna?
We communicate much less about the creative than you might think. There *is* a lot of texting between me and Demna, but it's usually about daily company stuff, like, 'This person wants to leave the company', or whatever. The creative dialogue itself is a system between us that just works. It's really weird. Often Demna doesn't need a lot of words to tell me where he wants to go. He's not really the type of person to come in and talk a lot anyway. I'm the one who talks a lot! If he suggests something to me, I'll ask 15 questions back, because I am so curious. So through my questions, I can also hint to him, and suggest things.

You've worked with Demna for 10 years now. What is his greatest skill?
Yes, it's our 10-year anniversary! Maybe you'll think this answer is predictable, but Demna is extremely visionary and he has a fantastic ability to imagine things in 3D, or whatever form. I cannot enter his mind but I know that he has this ability to imagine *anything*. I don't know if that comes from his childhood – when he was dreaming a lot about other things, and escaping the world – but his fantasy is so daring and free. Not that he is one of these 'fantastical' designers, creating fairy-tale worlds with characters, but of course, you need fantasy in order to create things in your mind, and he can do that very well.

And Demna's biggest flaw?
Ouch, that's tough! [Long pause] I think it has something to do with the confidence he sometimes lacks, so in order to protect himself or to hide from that, he can create thick walls around himself. It's not ideal, but he's human.

Demna told me, 'I'm a pragmatist but I also want to break things.' What is your own rapport with this tension between working within a large corporate structure and being free to create?
I think I'm similar to Demna in that way. I am not so much into astrology, but I'm a Gemini and people often tell me it's linked to that. I like doing things very correctly, being very organized and neat, and I am not really into doing anything illegal. But at the same time, I love to provoke and do things differently, to put something out there and for people to be like, 'What the fuck? What am I looking at?'

To what extent does carte blanche really exist within a company of this scale? And is having carte blanche always a positive thing?
The relationship between Demna and Cédric [Charbit, Balenciaga CEO] is crucial in this; it gives us that foundation. I think there is an agreement between them that this is a house driven by design and creativity. That's not always been the case though. There was conflict in the past, and a lot of the time, the answer was, '*Non, c'est pas possible*', and we were like, '*Well*, try, because we think it *is* possible!' So it didn't always feel like carte blanche, but looking back, a lot of what we've done has of course been thanks to that sense of freedom.

I guess success breeds that freedom…
We always laugh about this – maybe Demna told you the story, too – but when we designed the Triple S sneaker, everyone told us, 'No, you cannot make that, you can't produce it.' And Cédric was like, 'No, no, no. It's ugly, it's big, it's heavy, it cannot be made.' And then a

'I think I have a certain understanding of – it's such a horrible word – but of 'chicness' and quality. I think Demna sees those things a bit differently.'

little later everyone came back to us and was like, 'Could you make some more, could you do different colours?'

Did you sense the commercial potential of the Triple S right from the start?
I actually did. Maybe because the longer I do this job, the more I learn. But this also brings up an interesting problem that I think about all the time: the thing about getting bigger is, sure, you have more cash flow, so you can launch couture or do a show on water, which of course are expensive things, but I also know that as we grow bigger, it is not our 'intellectual' audience that is growing; it's actually the other end of the spectrum. I know that because I get feedback on what works in the store and what doesn't. So when we launched the Triple S, I thought it *was* going to work, the long run. But, personally, I have a problem with the waste that we create.

Is that always a factor in your thinking?
Yes, because I know if something is super commercial then we will sell too much of it, which does impact levels of waste. But of course, I am part of this capitalist system in a corporate structure, and it's my job to make things that sell. So I am constantly evaluating: 'Is that going to be a limited-edition success? Will it sell out? Will people buy it and keep it forever?' But at the same I also understand what the broader audience wants. So if we make a product that is successful and *will* sell out, that is obviously satisfying, even though the burden of the quantity and the amount of stuff we produce is heavy, you know. But then, there are many *other* things commercially better, better team management, all of it.

What did you enjoy most about launching couture?
Oh, it felt *incredible*, finally having the counterbalance to this high-speed pressure that we feel with the ready-to-wear. With couture, we had the luxury of *time*.

Cédric Charbit often talks about Balenciaga being both streetwear and couture, and you sense he loves that breadth of activity and product, and what that represents. What's your take?
We always talk about the 'pyramid' when it comes to our product offer: at the base you have all the T-shirts and sneakers, and then it goes up to the tip, but for a while we didn't have a tip because we didn't have couture. The

'In an industry that only few people can afford – and nobody actually needs – I see it almost as my duty to consider other issues, such as sustainability.'

because no shoe like that had ever existed – and people want new things. Today, however, with the larger audience we have, I am not so sure if a shoe like that would work. So I am questioning this more; I'm feeling almost poisoned by it.

Poisoned by the success?
Poisoned by the commercial capitalist aspect of what I'm doing. And I know that Demna doesn't always like what I have to say about these things. He'll sometimes look at me and say, 'I don't want to hear that, leave me alone.' Fair enough, because I don't want to make him feel constrained. But sometimes I have to tell him, 'Hey, I think this is not going to do it.' *Nobody* wants that. And I do think some of the things I've said have made him rethink, and that's brought us to make better decisions in we make that are in between, which don't sell out. I'm just always thinking about what the journey will be for whatever product or idea I am giving birth to.

So is it fair to say that couture is the most responsible Balenciaga product?
Of course, because you produce on order, and it's made for someone who will keep it. It's the opposite of a cheap shoe that loses its sole after five months and ends up in landfill. But then I have to add, if you consider that 60 people work for a year to make 10 dresses, like… what *is* that? [Sighs] I don't know, I just question all these details.

Each product range has pros and cons.
I am so critical of myself, I'm always trying to push to do things better – creatively better, conceptually better, other problem was that the shorts and the sneakers were selling so well. And we are obviously supposed to grow, so how do you grow fast? You make more sneakers and T-shirts, rather than an expensive tailored coat. That was something we were always fighting about, because I can honestly say that if there was *only* the streetwear side, I wouldn't be so happy. Demna's the same, like, 'How can we bring the more exclusive and daring pieces into the offer?' And of course, through launching couture we no longer have to debate this pyramid. That feels like a big achievement. But the truth is, we *needed* all the other things to be selling well in order to launch the couture in the first place. It wouldn't have been possible otherwise.

Put like that, it feels quite logical and 'earned'. There's no sense of affectation or parade, or it being a marketing plan.
I think so, too, because the idea was born on the creative side of the company. Today, the job I have is overseeing both the design studio and the brand-image department. I think we are the only company within our group, and maybe even in the industry, where that's the case. If you have someone who works with the creative director on the detailed design of the top stitch of a pair of pants, then is coming up with collaboration ideas with the World Food Programme, then working on the ad campaign, you will feel a certain authenticity that you cannot achieve if you have too many cooks in the kitchen. Of course, if there *were* more of us, certain things would go quicker, but then it would get diluted.

'Couture is the opposite of a cheap shoe that loses its sole after five months and ends up in landfill. But 60 people work for a year to make 10 dresses.'

How do you personally deal with the volume of work that's required? And does all the brand activity genuinely translate into greater customer loyalty? Is there ever a sense of overexposure?
That's exactly what we're discussing internally right now. Of course, it is extremely rewarding to put out successful projects, but it can be intense, and my principal responsibility is to protect my teams from overworking. I'd be lying if I said that was easy. From an audience perspective, it is the same: we have to be careful not to overwhelm them, even though we're an extremely creative team, full of ideas. So we constantly ask ourselves the question, 'How frequently should we put stuff out?' The thing is, people are used to consuming so much because of the culture of social media; it's happening *everywhere*. So if you reduce your activity you ask yourself the question, 'Will people come back and watch again? Will they forget about us?' I don't have the perfect answer for this.

Finally, veganism is a passion of yours, and I am interested to talk about that in the context of Balenciaga. Cédric Charbit has said in the past, 'If we can influence how people dress, we can also try to make them think.' Could Balenciaga become a vehicle to promote veganism and other lifestyles with the same success and influence that it has creating hype and selling products?
I agree with Cédric. It *is* possible to help make people think. But is our audience really listening or just spending a second to look at a picture before carrying on scrolling? For those people who spend more time with the brand's campaigns and collections, we probably make them think, although it's up to them what their reaction is. Working in an industry that only a small number of people can afford – and that nobody actually needs – I see it almost as my duty to consider other issues, such as sustainability. It would be too one-dimensional if we only cared about our luxury sneaker.

With veganism, I have been doing it for a long time and for me it is all about health – it is healthy for me, healthy for animals, and healthy for the environment. It's a win-win-win situation. But at the same time, I work at Balenciaga and we make a lot of products using leather, which is a problem, and so people can justifiably call me a hypocrite. That's why I'm very careful with making it clear that I have a vegan diet – and that's where it ends. Because working in this company, I also wear leather products and I have a leather bag. But what I've done since I arrived here is constantly question what materials we could use instead of leather. Replacing leather with plastic is obviously not the solution, so could we use cotton with a certain coating? My brother, who is a vegan, and I talk a lot about this stuff, and the 'controversy' of me being a vegan and working here. He always tells me, 'You're at the perfect place because you can change it from the *inside*.' And that is really what I am trying to do.

Has that proven difficult?
It's a big ship and it takes time to turn it around. But today, we have only vegan catering for our company events; the couture dinner was vegan, the catering on all our photo productions is vegan...

Did that require a big push?
Oh, yes. When I said it the first time, six years ago, the answer I got – from French men, by the way – was, 'It is not possible because French people need meat and if you don't give them meat, they get angry.' [Laughs] For real! Only once we had the right people in the right positions at the company could everyone say, 'No problem, let's make the necessary changes and eat vegan'. I guess this transition really symbolizes many of the others things I have fought for at this company – related to products and teams – and now I can say I have succeeded.

Interview by Jonathan Wingfield

BALENCIAGA

BFRND

It's hard to appreciate the sheer visceral nature of the Balenciaga runway experience until you've been physically immersed in it. Demna Gvasalia's set designs, casting and collections themselves are of course the habitual stars of the show, but anyone who's *felt* the Balenciaga show soundtracks (the volume's always turned up to 11) will attest to the inimitable pounding that the music impresses on both body and mind (it's something a remote livestream isn't able to convey). Over the past five years, the shows have featured thunderous techno, twisted electronica, anxiety-inducing industrial goth rock, and a form of *uber*-tense cinematic orchestration that makes the soundtrack to the average *Bourne* chase sequence feel like a Disney score. And then, of course, there is deafening silence, as used this summer to sublime effect to 'soundtrack' Gvasalia's debut couture show.

All are the work of French musician BFRND. As husband of Demna Gvasalia, show composer and model (thanks to his pitch-perfect, on-brand look), he occupies a unique place in the modern-day Balenciaga landscape. His physical and cultural proximity to Gvasalia's world allows him to embed his highly emotive sounds deep into every show's concept and meaning.

BFRND sat down with *System* to discuss death metal, Hans Zimmer, and how his and Gvasalia's shared life in rural Switzerland provides the most fertile conditions to compose his next 'conceptual mindfuck'.

Can you remember the first music you discovered for yourself, which wasn't just handed down to you from parents or elder siblings?
BFRND: It does actually come from my parents, because my dad used to listen to a lot of new wave, hard rock, electronic trance and techno. I just went harder! At the age of maybe 13, I got into black metal and industrial cyber goth.

How did you discover that stuff?
I used to help a friend who had her own music venue, near where I grew up in the south of France, near the Spanish border. So I would meet a lot of touring musicians – from hard-metal bands to industrial electronica.

What drew you to these more extreme musical genres?
I think it was just the search for adrenaline. I was a frustrated teenager from a very small town and music was my only way to express myself. No one in the music scene questioned my sexuality or the way I looked. Frustration was definitely a big part of it: I always wanted to listen to or play or write music from morning to evening. I wanted to be on stage; I wanted to record albums. I wanted it so bad, and I found ways. As a teenager I started singing in a death-metal band and we played in the end-of-year show at our small Catholic school. We just tricked everyone into playing, and when the parents heard our satanic lyrics, they all left!

Were you also attracted to the image and style elements of the music and the artists you listened to?
For sure, especially when I got more into the super gothic style. I'd grab whatever I could find, steal stuff from my mum, find non-gothic dark clothes, use make-up, shave my eyebrows, just use anything I could. There were a lot of goth people at the time, but looking back, it just seems like too much of a stereotype, a kind of costume. I believe you should do your own thing, and these days, even though I still have this underlying goth vision, my look feels more modern, and unique to me.

How did you and Demna meet? What music do you associate with that time?
We met on Facebook in 2016. I didn't know who he was, and my best friend was like, 'Oh, you're going to fall in love and marry him; you too are so similar.' I was really excited, and about a week later we met in person in London, and we fell in love, and then a year later we got married in Switzerland. The prophecy came true! The Throbbing Gristle track 'Almost a Kiss' was the song that we were listening to that whole time.

Tell me about your first fashion-related project, the Vetements 'Stereotypes' show music for Winter 2017.
I had never done anything like that in my life. I was so scared, but I loved it because it was really the moment when Vetements became this conceptual mindfuck. Every look was so studied, with all the detailing on the clothes – and I was thrown in there among it all.

Let's talk about your Balenciaga show soundtracks.
It is like a movie; you have to make the audience feel something. It is not just some random techno track playing while the show takes place: look by look, the show tells a story. You create a kind of movement, a journey, as the music and the looks change at the same time, to reveal a parallel story.

At what point in the collection or show preparation does the conversation with Demna start about music?
Even before the concept is given to the designers. Demna does research at home, so we exchange about the format of the show, the mood of the music, and about whether to take a more industrial, more electronic or more orchestrated approach.

Tension and anxiety are central to the soundtracks you compose.
That's because tension and anxiety are the two things I feel when I walk in the street. When you have a strong look, like a Balenciaga look, people really react to it – in a good way, a shocked way, an angry way, many different ways – but you get seen. What you wear gives you a kind of emotion as well: a Balenciaga shoe makes you walk differently; the clothes make you feel different, like a powerful character, and not just a costume. Those are all the feelings and emotions I try to put into the music. And I think the audience comes to a Balenciaga show knowing it's going to experience something different. The music helps the whole thing throb with adrenalin and feelings.

Your soundtracks are perhaps best known for their thunderous beats, but there are also moments of beautiful cinematic orchestration. Where does that side come from?
Probably from industrial music, where you often have a cinematic intro and ending that uses orchestration, almost like in a science-fiction movie. Then you go back to something that hits your brain with really heavy, dark industrial sounds. The way the contrast works really triggers a lot of emotion.

What kind of film soundtracks do you particularly respond to?
For me, Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross's soundtrack for *The Social Network* is the best ever made. I also love Hans Zimmer because his sound is just perfect. People sometimes avoid investigating classical music because they think it is too old, but we all listen to classical music all the time, and most of that is through Hans Zimmer's soundtrack work.

When you record the orchestration for Balenciaga shows, do you commission professional musicians?
No, I do it all myself. I actually bought a synthesizer created by Hans Zimmer – he has a keyboard made of his own orchestra recordings, which is then synthesized, which he uses for his first drafts – so I have that, and it's like having Hans Zimmer's orchestra at home!

Let's talk about the solo BFRND track you released earlier this year, 'French Connection'. It's definitely in that lineage of great 'bedroom pop' songs.
Yes, it is pop. BFRND is two different things under the same name. I do the soundtracks, which have a certain audience, and then I write my own solo tracks, which allows me to experiment in different pop or industrial directions. I am preparing a small live tour at the moment, but not in standard concert venues; I am a bit bored of the traditional 'black box'. I'd rather perform in a church, in the woods, or by the pyramids in Egypt; there are so many places where people aren't used to going to see a show. That is what fashion taught me. Vetements once did a show in McDonald's, so why not a concert in McDonald's, or in the Paris metro?

And lastly, at what point was the decision made to present Demna's debut couture show in total silence?
It was quite clear from the very first conversation Demna and I had. We had been for dinner in Paris and there was a live pianist, although I didn't know it was live to start with. Suddenly, while we were eating, the pianist stopped playing and I was like, 'Oh my God, that's it.' I only realized there had been music once it had stopped, and there was this amazing silence. For the show, we put this kind of loud obnoxious jazz music before it started. Then we shut it down and the first model came out. The audience didn't even realize; they were still talking among themselves until the first model walked past. It was a strong emotion, like it was for the models, too. I was walking in that show, and hearing people react – saying 'wow'; things you'd never hear when loud show music is playing – was a unique experience.

Interview by Jonathan Wingfield

'As a teenager I started singing in a death-metal band. We played in the end-of-year show at our small Catholic school in the south of France.'

'It is not just some random techno track playing while the show takes place. The music and the looks change at the same time, to reveal parallel stories.'

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Inge Grognard

Inge Grognard has been creating visceral beauty looks for the fashion industry's most boundary-pushing talent for over four decades: the Antwerp Six, Raf Simons, Haider Ackermann, Hood By Air, and more.

It's Grognard's relationships with two other figures that mark the most significant chapters in her career, however. The first, with Martin Margiela, launched it; the second, with Demna Gvasalia at Balenciaga, has more recently catapulted her work into the mainstream.

Antwerp is the linchpin that connects the Belgian make-up artist with both, as well as other key collaborators throughout her career. It was where she followed Margiela from their hometown of Genk, in the early 1970s, having become friends as teens. And it's the epicentre of the creative energy that united her with the Antwerp Six, photographer and husband Ronald Stoops, Raf Simons, and students at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, where she still advises on beauty for graduate shows. It's also where she first met Gvasalia in 2006, when he was one of those students.

The synergy between Grognard and Gvasalia has fostered innovative future-facing looks, featuring alien, unsettling make-up, and effects that blur the boundaries between what's real and augmented at Balenciaga: prosthetics made to look like extreme lip and cheek filler at its Spring/Summer 2020 show, and virtual-reality make-up for its Autumn 2021 *Afterworld* video game.

'I'm still somebody who very much likes to work with my hands, explaining with my hands, feeling things,' she says. 'I have to feel the texture – and it's the same with clothes.' It's a hands-on approach that can be seen in her work with Balenciaga, which fuses rawness and romance to create a dark, subtly subversive glamour, well-matched to Gvasalia's clothing. Grognard spoke to *System* about Antwerp, her journey to Balenciaga, and what makes the collaboration with Gvasalia so ground-breaking.

You play a really important part in Balenciaga's recent history, but let's start with your relationship with Demna. How did you first meet?

Inge Grognard: I've been in the business for a long time. I started in the 1980s, with the Antwerp Six and Martin Margiela, and I later worked with other Belgian designers, Raf and Veronique [Branquinho]. Demna started a whole new era in a way, which is a nice thing. As with all the other designers I've worked with, I met them through the Academy in Antwerp. They all studied there, and I've been linked to it for a long time, because I consult on the end-of-year shows giving students ideas for the make-up in their shows. That's how I met Demna. It was such a long time ago that I can't quite remember our first meeting, but Ronald, my husband, shot his final-year collection. Demna then stayed in Antwerp for a long time, working for Scapa [Sport] with Walter [Van Beirendonck]. What I remember about him, though, is that he was a person who touched me enormously. I remember that he was really human – and for me, that's so important.

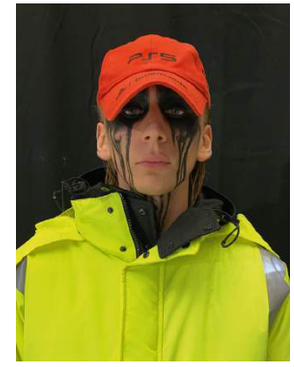
At what point did you actually start working together? Was this prior to Balenciaga?

It would have been when he was at Martin Margiela, after Martin left. I continued for two seasons after Martin left, when the press didn't know he wasn't there, and the company wanted to continue working as if nothing was happening. But we didn't work together properly until he started at Vetements. I got a call from him while he was still working at Louis Vuitton [as senior designer of women's ready-to-wear], and he said, 'This is a big secret; I'm starting my own collection. Are you interested in doing the make-up?' I hadn't seen anything, but I immediately said yes, and went to Paris. There was no money, but I didn't care – I don't care when I believe in people. That was it; I did the first lookbook, then I worked with him again and again, and I'm still going.

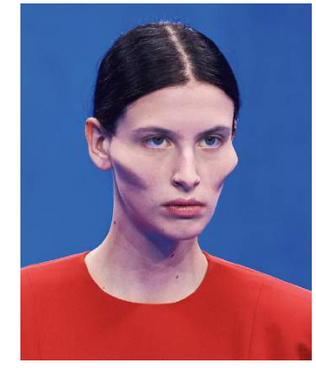
Tell me about your early experiences of working together. What was the dynamic between you both and your shared working process?

The day of the first Vetements collection, there wasn't a lot happening: there was a mood board; there was Enya [Vandenhende], who still works with him at Balenciaga; there was a little bit of styling. From that I pick out the things that I wanted to work with in the make-up. The only thing I remember with the first collection we worked on

'Coming from a northern country like Belgium, we love a kind of rawness; that is in the work. Also, a lot of romanticism, but with a darkness.'



Balenciaga, *Afterworld,*
Autumn 2021.



Balenciaga,
Spring 2020.

Balenciaga, *Afterworld*,
Autumn 2021.
Backstage photograph by Inge Grognard

Balenciaga, *Afterworld*,
Autumn 2021.
Backstage photograph by Inge Grognard

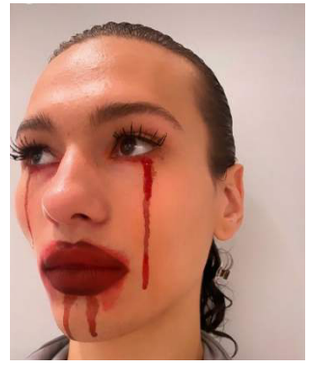
Balenciaga, Autumn/Winter 2020.
Backstage photograph by Inge Grognard

Balenciaga,
Spring 2020.

Balenciaga, *Afterworld,*
Autumn 2021.

Balenciaga,
Spring/Summer 2022.
Photograph by Olivier Vigerie

Balenciaga,
Autumn/Winter 2020.
Backstage photograph by Inge Grognard



Balenciaga, *Afterworld,*
Autumn 2021.
Backstage photograph by Inge Grognard

was that we put food colouring on the models' tongues. That's why when you see the pictures, the girls are like 'bleurgh', with their tongues out. For the rest, there wasn't a lot of make-up going on, because the clothes were strong, and the models had strong faces.

It started with trust: he trusted me; I trusted him and believed in something new. I could never have imagined that he would go onto work for a house as big as this one, but I believed in his work and in him as a person. It's my first time at such a huge house. I normally work for designers who stay quite small; they stay independent. I never thought things would grow so quickly after Vetements.

Has the scale of working for a significantly bigger brand changed the way you work together?

Usually, at a big house, it's difficult to stay in contact with the designer himself, but the beautiful thing about Demna is that he's still the same. I still get a brief directly from him, usually very personal, via WhatsApp. He'll say, 'This time I'm doing this', then send me the mood board. I'll send one back when he wants more of a make-up look; for example, to show what kind of eyeliner look we could do, how I see it.

At what point do you start receiving those WhatsApp messages about the collection and start shaping the beauty look for the show?

Just a couple of days before. They'll do a fitting day, and say, maybe, 'We just want beautiful skin', and we'll discuss whether to keep the skin a little shiny or matte – the light at the show is important for me to know – but that's it. We do change things on the day, though; things that can be done quite quickly, like the eyeliner on the men at the couture show. I initially did it quite straight, but they wanted it to be a little more feminine, so we just changed it. The *Afterworld* video-game show was quite different, though; it was more precise. Demna had some make-up looks in mind that he wanted to try, so we spent a very long day trying all of them.

Does having only a short period to plan suit your approach? Your work has always felt quite spontaneous with the brush strokes, and where you place colour.

I always work like that; it's normal. You get a mood board, specific colours or the music, then arrive the day before and have an hour to propose what you think is the best for that collection. Some designers know exactly what they want, but some are more open. It feels very collaborative at Balenciaga.

How about the advantages of Balenciaga-sized budgets when it comes to creativity, experimentation, and the tools you have at your disposal? You're now working on make-up for virtual-reality games and digital lookbooks, with special-effects studios to create prosthetics for campaigns and shows.

The prosthetics idea came from Demna. He wanted to work with them, but I specialize in make-up, and that's special effects, so you need to find the right people to do that. The thing was that it *had* to look real. Demna wanted people to question what's real and what's not; that's the way he always works. It started with the casting, we took models with high cheekbones and bigger lips. We tried chin prosthetics, but that was a bit much…

How did you respond when he first said he wanted to work with prosthetics?

I'm *always* open. I knew the difficulty would be matching the colour of the skin to the prosthetics, especially with darker skin. In the beginning, the cheekbones came with blush; the contouring was already there. So we had to work together to make it like any show, where you start with natural skin. The lips looked totally real to me; the models could really have had those lips – because a lot of people do. It was about playing with the idea of what's real and what's not, and *that's* the bit I really love. That's why you'll notice that they all had natural make-up. With Balenciaga, even when there are effects, there is nearly always natural make-up: the base will look like skin because the faces of the models are *strong* and the collections are *strong*. When it feels right to have more make-up, there will be more make-up, but otherwise, there is almost nothing.

Tell me about the bolder looks you've done. Like the big, black 'bleeding' eye make-up and red lips for the video-game show. Was your approach different because of the virtual reality and gaming context?

Really, no. I didn't really change anything. It was different only in the way that the models were playing characters, not themselves, and Demna knew

'Demna wanted the prosthetics idea to look real, so we took models with high cheekbones and bigger lips. We tried chin prosthetics, but it was a bit much.'

exactly which role he wanted the models to play, and which kinds of characters he wanted them to be. It had all the things he loves, too, with heavy metal [references] running through it, with the black eyes, which is something I love in my work, with the running make-up and 'imperfect' things.

Did knowing that those looks would only be experienced digitally affect your process, in terms of products and technique? Your work has always felt really visceral and tactile.
The process was still me, because in everything I do, even when the look is really specific to the collection or designer, I want to feel my *hand* in it; the person in front of me is very important. I want to feel the skin, the texture; I want to feel an emotion – and I want to express that. Most of the time, my mood. Anger gives me a big push – when I feel something has happened in my life or in the world that I really don't like. It pushes me in a direction to say, 'OK, let's do something about this.' Let me do something with that feeling. Ugliness gives me a push; it's not just about beauty.

What attracted you to beauty as a career or sparked your interest in make-up?
I was interested in clothes; no, I was *obsessed* with clothes, and I was very particular about what I wanted. Basically, I was difficult! I met Josiane, Martin Margiela's niece, in high school and met him through her, and that was our thing; together, the three of us were *obsessed* with clothes. Then, of course, when you think about clothes, and dressing up, you think about the face and start experimenting on yourself – just a little bit of lipstick, a little bit of colour here, thinking about it with the boots you're wearing, how it all works together. There was lots of experimenting, because there weren't a lot of magazines I could buy when I was 14. There were Belgian magazines you could buy, all about music, and maybe the beginning of the British magazines – *The Face*, *i-D*, *Blitz* – but we were mostly having fun by experimenting on ourselves. That was our thing.

Tell me more about you and Martin Margiela. Your working relationship lasted right up until he left his brand in 2009 and he was your introduction to the Antwerp Six.
When Martin decided to go to the Academy when he was 18, Josiane and I looked into schools in Antwerp to study make-up. That's how we ended up there, and we ended up going to the parties with students from the Academy: Walter [Van Beirendonck], who was in Martin's year, then the following year, Marina Yee and everyone else.

We would be around in the evenings when they were sticking things together, working on the collections – just having a lot of fun dressing-up. We would go out, go to second-hand shops and to Cinderella, this basement punk club,[1] where everybody was spilling beer on the ground, smoking cigarettes, with heavy black make-up on their eyes, running around and running out. There was *energy*.

How did all of that turn into a working relationship?
In a way, I was so lucky to be right there, at the right time, at the right moment, with the right people. You don't think about it when you're in it. You don't ask yourself questions – you just go on, you learn, you make mistakes. That's how it happens.

After a certain time, I was asked by the Six to go to London; then I went to Florence with them in a mobile home. I was just always there, in the middle of a thing that was starting, without knowing it would be a thing that people would still be talking about. There was no 'fashion scene' in Belgium. Everything was happening in Paris and London; there was nothing in Belgium.

Looking at what was happening in those other cities at that time, though –

'We put food colouring on the models' tongues. That's why when you see the pictures, the girls are like 'bleurgh', with their tongues out.'

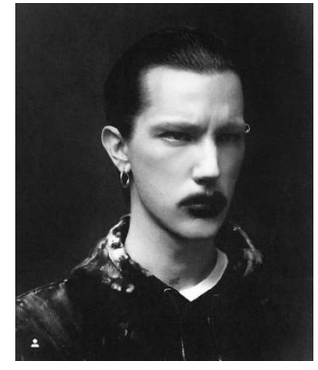
It's not always possible, but I always *try* to do that. You can see that more easily in editorial work for magazines, like *Beauty Papers*, than with brands.

How do you technically translate that feeling into practice?
You need to have the technical skills, which I learned a long time ago – how to make a 'perfect' lip or liner, all those things – but, for me, that is not the interesting part. I always want to put my own stamp on everything, to play with it. I've always experimented on myself and I'll always have somebody who has my back, like my husband, Ronald, who gives me really good criticism, too. He'll tell me, 'Oh no, this is not working on camera', which helps me develop ideas.

What feeds your creativity and ideas?

Jurgi Persoons, Spring/Summer 2003.
Photograph by Ronald Stoops

Beauty Papers magazine,
'Glamour' issue, 2019.
Photograph by Ronald Stoops and
Stef Van Looveren



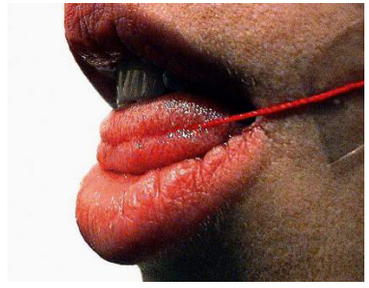
Numéro Netherlands, Autumn 2021.
Photograph by Szilveszter Makó

Mask by Inge Grognard, 2001.
Photograph by Ronald Stoops

Sputnik magazine, 1998.
Photograph by Ronald Stoops

Walter Van Beirendonck,
Spring/Summer 2018.
Photograph by Ronald Stoops

Photograph by Ronald Stoops, 2001



Jurgi Persoons, 1999.
Photograph by Ronald Stoops

Vetements,
Spring/Summer 2020.
Backstage photograph by Inge Grognard

'Post Punk', *View on Colour*
magazine, 2000.
Photograph by Ronald Stoops

your first show with Martin Margiela in Paris in 1989 was exactly why he and the Antwerp Six stood out. It was different.
Because we wanted to do the opposite. The other designers in Paris at the time, Montana and Mugler, were all about glamour, glamour, glamour – big liner and false lashes. There was also Yohji [Yamamoto] and Rei [Kawakubo], who were incredible and different from the rest, but we didn't want to copy them. We wanted to bring something else in make-up and clothes. Coming from a northern country as well, we love a kind of rawness, and there was that in the work. Also, a lot of romanticism, but with a darkness.

What was the response to what you were doing as a make-up artist? You've described that first Margiela as 'chaos' and said the make-up wasn't doing anything you wanted it to.
Oh, the 'chaos' that first time with Martin, in 1989! Jenny [Meirens], his right hand, had to go searching for assistants for me, because I had no agent. And it was at Café de la Gare, and it was *so* dark.[2] I had make-up artists everywhere, and we were working with a black pigment that no one was used to working with; I could work with it, but I couldn't do all the models. It was *really* black, and you would put it on the eyes, and it would go all over the skin, and we had to clean it the whole time, then as soon as you touched it, you would leave a big black stripe. I was supposed to be in the show – my clothes were hanging in front of me – but I didn't have time. Impossible! It was so complicated, because the space was tiny, the assistants and I weren't used to working with each other either, and they were used to working in a way that was very classic. The [critics] were saying, 'This is not what I want to see now.' In a way, of course you're [negatively] touched by that, but I felt that people would understand at some point. They did – but it took a long time.

Let's talk about the show you just did: Balenciaga Spring/Summer 2022 at the Théâtre du Châtelet, with the celebrities and models on the red carpet, rather than the runway. Celebrities play a huge role in the shows and campaigns at major brands. Do you do that type of work?
You can see on my website – there's nothing on there about celebrities! [Laughs] There are more and more personalities [involved], but I've skipped that for a large part of my life. I'm not always the right person to work with them, because they are very specific about what they want. For the last show, I only did the models. The celebrities – and the Simpsons – were a surprise!

A lot of make-up artists are in the beauty game now, launching their own make-up brands. Is that something you've ever considered?
No. Because there are *so* many brands! The Chinese market, the Korean market, the American market – they're so huge, what could I bring to it? I wouldn't know. Also, is there a need for new products? It's difficult. A long time ago, there were a lot of gaps in the market, but not any more. You can find all the colours you want; you can buy all the basic ingredients from specialist shops in Paris and mix them to make your own lipsticks or whatever, and do your own experiments. It's incredible. Is beauty still missing something? No. The people who start their own brands are very brave, and they make *really* nice products. Fenty is really nice, I have them; I have Westman Atelier and Pat McGrath products at home, and the packaging and quality is *really* nice. You can't use them professionally, though – the packaging is too heavy! It's beautiful for the bathroom, but you can't travel with it. I have a room filled with bags, just plastic bags filled with glitters and body paints and other things.

Do you work with brands to develop your own formulas behind the scenes for professional use? Brands like MAC, with whom you've worked since the start of your career.
MAC was the first to sponsor me. They believed in me, and always worked with me on shows. Developing products? Not quite. I would tell them if something were missing, like specific colours. There was this very particular blue, like a BIC pen, that I wanted and I couldn't find, so they developed it for me. Also, in the beginning, with the lip gloss, I said we need something thicker – and I wasn't the only one! – so they came out with the Lipglass. So, make-up artists ask for things, and maybe a year later they appear.

What do you think is the future of the beauty industry?
I don't think something like prosthetics will ever be an option because it's very complicated to put on the skin. Even applying the products is just too difficult. But plastic surgery has become so huge. When you look around, almost everybody seems to have had something done!

Interview by Sara McAlpine

1. Cinderella – or Cinderella's Ballroom – was a basement club that opened on Stadswaag, a square in Antwerp, in 1975. Originally a glam-rock venue, it shifted towards post-punk and new wave in the early 1980s and was described by one regular as 'an amazing place with a David Lynch atmosphere'.

2. Martin Margiela's Parisian debut show – for which the invitation was sent by telegram – was held at the Café de le Gare, a small Parisian theatre, on October 23, 1988. It featured 52 looks and introduced his deconstructed aesthetic to a wider audience. It also marked the first sighting of the now-iconic Tabi split-toe shoe.

All *Simpsons* images © The Simpsons 20th TV Animation/Balenciaga

Photography assistant: Tarek Cassim
Post-production: Catalin Plesa at Quickfix Retouch

‘How far can we go with this?’

After Balenciaga’s recent *Fortnite* collaboration, IRL and the metaverse have never felt so blurred.

By Jonathan Wingfield

On September 20, Balenciaga revealed its collaboration with Epic Games, the $28-billion-valued company behind *Fortnite*. In the immensely popular multiplayer game, players control larger-than-life avatars in a vast, candy-coloured, exaggerated fantasy world where they fight to the death with shotguns, pistols and assault rifles. Thanks to the tie-up, for that following week, the avatars could go about their business in perfectly rendered, 3D versions of Balenciaga outfits. And beyond the clothes, the avatars could also model on featured billboards in the game, walk into a virtual Balenciaga store, even knock down walls with a stick-mounted version of the brand's iconic Speed sneaker.

Balenciaga's whole-hearted embrace of the gaming universe is the latest example of the increasingly ambitious rapport between the brand, Epic Games and its 3D software Unreal Engine, and the metaverse in general. Gvasalia has toyed with the possibilities of the virtual since 2018, when he enlisted Canadian digital artist Jon Rafman to create an apocalyptic video installation along the length of the catwalk for his Spring/Summer 2019 show. Then came *Afterworld*, the Autumn 2021 show created during Covid lockdown, which presented the entire collection in an immersive, video-game-like world brought to life by Unreal Engine. But where that spoke to the fashion world in new and disruptive ways, the *Fortnite* collaboration brought Balenciaga to a mass-market of young gamers, mostly hitherto unaware of the brand and without the means to buy luxury fashion.

'Meta-' means 'across' or 'after', and the sheer scale of this latest chapter in the metaverse strained the boundaries between real life and the digital world. The huge 3D-digital billboards installed to publicize the project over Piccadilly Circus, Times Square, Shibuya Crossing, and in Seoul, felt strangely coded and subversive. Set amid frantic, hyper-coloured advertising, the monochrome ad featured a bare grey chamber occupied by a dozing, anthropomorphized bulldog – *Fortnite*'s Doggo – wearing a Balenciaga white hoodie, black baggy jeans, and an insouciant air that spoke as much to *Fortnite* fans as the fashion brand's devotees. The collaboration had substance, as well as style: Balenciaga opened a virtual pop-up store of digital fashion in *Fortnite* at the same time that the collection became available in physical stores. Despite the prize advertising locations, the real-world campaign was dwarfed by its online twin: when the Doggo billboard stood in *Fortnite*, it played to an audience of 400 million registered players – nearly 10 times the population of London, New York, Tokyo and Seoul combined.

Fashion obviously has history with digital, sometimes tending to treat collaborations as side-projects or gimmicks. But the Balenciaga project is no dead end. It owes its creation to advances in graphics and world building – such as those in Unreal Engine – that can finally deliver on the promise to convey the quality of luxury clothes in a virtual setting. And it demonstrated a new dimension in fashion marketing – a way for brands to find cultural traction on a massive scale. So where next? Fashion shoots in VR, physical items mirrored in online versions: all the signs point deeper into the metaverse. *System* spoke to Balenciaga, Epic Games and Unreal Engine about crossing barriers, creation, identity, and what we now consume when we consume fashion.

What is it about the world of gaming that appeals to the Balenciaga brand?

Demna Gvasalia, creative director, Balenciaga: Gaming offers us a new dimension; that's what appeals to me. I've long wondered about virtual fashion, but I thought, 'Who needs it?' Personally, I want to work with the human body, and gaming hasn't been my comfort zone. When Cédric [Charbit, Balenciaga CEO] came up with the idea of doing *Fortnite*, I was really excited, though, because it's something I didn't know about. It's like different types of embroidery in couture: 'We can do that with the fabric.' It's the same thing with the virtual: 'We can do those skins; we can create this whole Balenciaga world within the game.' That triggered my excitement because it was so unknown to me. At the same time, I realized the importance of Balenciaga being this kind of 'media conglomerate', as I've seen people recently refer to us. It's going in that direction; that's why we did one of our shows in *Afterworld* instead of a physical show. That experience was unique – one of the most complex, but really unique. I was like, how far can we go with this?

Cédric Charbit, CEO, Balenciaga: I actually always thought it was Demna's

'You don't have to be able to afford Balenciaga to understand its cultural relevance; you see it everywhere on Instagram or your TikTok feed.'

Development of the Unchained Ramirez Outfit inspired by a look from the Balenciaga Autumn/Winter 2021 collection.

Doggo, with Knight and Banshee, in front of the Balenciaga virtual store in *Fortnite*.

The Fashion Banshee Outfit based on Balenciaga tiger-striped leggings.

Development of the Game Knight Outfit inspired by a look from the Balenciaga Autumn 2021 collection.

idea to do *Fortnite*! I see it as modern entertainment. Pop culture like this is massive, but because fashion does not generally operate in this territory, it's seen as off-limits. What we look for is innovation and modernity, and what I found interesting with Epic Games and *Fortnite* is exploring this idea that when we get dressed in the morning, we become characters. We remain ourselves, but we can transform into characters through our appearance, our clothes. And it's the same with gaming and the possibilities of skins: we can really become a different person or an extension of ourselves. The opportunities within that are endless.

Ever since its launch in 2017, *Fortnite* has invariably been described as a 'cultural phenomenon'. In an increasingly crowded games market, what makes *Fortnite* different?

Emily Levy, senior manager of partnerships, Epic Games: From the beginning, *Fortnite* has always been a place where players can connect socially. Those social experiences have evolved, and it's become much more than simply a battle royale game. At this point, we have 400 million registered accounts: lots of different kinds of players with lots of different interests, who want to express themselves in lots of different ways. We have outfits you can buy in the Item Shop or get as rewards by completing a challenge on the map. We have different kinds of cosmetics in the form of emotes, which are the dances you buy in the Item Shop, and including the ones seen on TikTok that we've brought into the game. From the very beginning, players have been swapping outfits between matches, so we know they care about what they're wearing and how they show up to a match with friends. We've also seen the proliferation of new experiences in which self-expression is really at the core. For example, we have built movie screenings and film festivals inside the game. We've even seen runway-style experiences take off inside *Fortnite*'s Creative Mode, which is where users can build and publish their own interactive designs. One of our top creators, Lachlan,[1] created a runway show where players could show up with their friends and perform emotes in their favourite outfits for the chance to win a cash prize. That video has over 11 million views on YouTube. Prior to the *Fortnite* partnership, Balenciaga had just cemented itself within the cultural zeitgeist between Justin Bieber and Kanye's *Donda* launch and Kim Kardashian at the Met Gala. You don't have to be able to afford Balenciaga to understand its cultural relevance; you see it everywhere on Instagram or your TikTok feed. *Afterworld* was an eye-opening moment for us, but even before that, Balenciaga had created these hyper-immersive runway experiences with Unreal Engine elements.

'We've built movie screenings and film festivals inside *Fortnite*, and had runway-style experiences where users built their own interactive designs.'

For the uninitiated, what is Unreal Engine?

Sallyann Houghton, Unreal Engine business development for fashion, Epic Games: The best way for people to think about Unreal Engine is as a creator of virtual worlds. It's 3D software that can create photoreal environments or whatever aesthetic you choose. They can exist IRL on a virtual production stage or on a huge interactive LED screen. They can be a fully immersive interactive space – a game or on a web browser – and they can be a VR world. There are all these different routes through many platforms that let you access these realistic, fantastical, limitless worlds, where people can come together. Historically, interactive 3D spaces have been used for games, but they're now being used to produce creative linear content. Artists and filmmakers are creating these spaces and then capturing a film, with cameras and lights, all virtual, but fundamentally exactly like they would in the real world. The same world can then be the backdrop for a fashion show, a 3D space in which virtual models and physical models move in unison and interact. In short, Unreal Engine's superhero power is building dense, creative, high-quality interactive worlds, and Balenciaga have been trailblazers in that space. They saw the potential when UE was still publicly seen as just a gaming engine, for creating games. They saw an opportunity to leverage its qualities and show the rest of the industry what was possible.

How does a collaboration like this manage the crossover between physical and virtual worlds? And how does Unreal Engine come into that?

Emily Levy: This was our first foray into luxury fashion, so it was important to us to do something that felt super holistic. We had the outfits in the Item Shop that were also purchasable in a virtual Balenciaga store inside the game; there

were quests inside a custom Balenciaga-inspired Creative Hub – which millions of players enter daily – to earn free cosmetics; there was a photography campaign inside the game where you could strike a pose and be featured in an evolving fashion lookbook on virtual billboards; and then there were the IRL billboards in Times Square, London, Seoul and Tokyo really bringing this into our world. We pushed the boundaries of what it means to blur physical and digital in a way that we'd never done. For the outfits we created, we picked four hyper-important, fan-favourite *Fortnite* characters, then looked into the Balenciaga archive and asked ourselves what these characters would choose to wear: iconic looks meeting iconic characters. We worked on things like how they posed and how the outfits were draped on the characters. Our artists and Balenciaga's creative team paid attention to the tiniest details, from the sequins on one of the outfits, to how a character faces the camera. They used new techniques in Unreal to represent looks inspired by Demna's creations at a granular level. We even made two of the Balenciaga outfits reactive, which means that they change over time as players complete activities on the map, something that simply can't be replicated in real life.

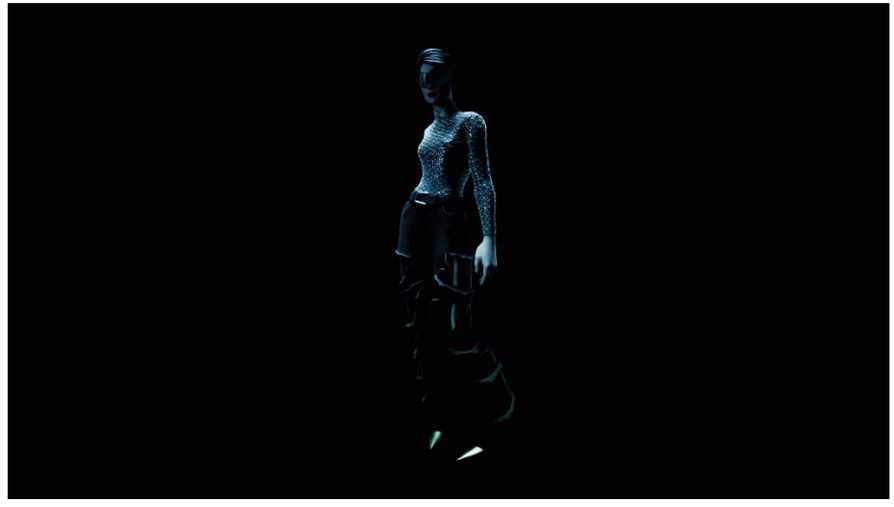
When the Doggo billboard stood in *Fortnite*, it played to an audience of 400 million – 10 times the population of London, New York, Tokyo and Seoul.

Sallyann Houghton: The reason that this can exist now, and potentially wouldn't have existed five years ago, is the 3D software. While game engines like Unreal Engine have progressed very fast over the past 10 years, it's really only in the past 5 years that they've been able to take the leap from game engines into photoreal capabilities. Once Unreal Engine became photoreal – when we were able to create dense, immersive, hyperreal environments – we were able to pull down the curtain that was believability. Before that, the interactivity of games and the landscape of gaming was always of interest and leveraged from time to time, but now, incredibly, you can create exact digital doubles, and take those digital doubles one step further to make a fantastical hyper-real version of whatever you're trying to convey, whether it's an emotion, clothes, people, objects or landscapes. This makes it all about the details, which is everything fashion loves – the weave, the cut, a fold, or a mood or vibe. Now you can surround a collection with an emotion. Unreal Engine can do that, so you can create virtual spaces and worlds that are exactly as you want them to be. Creatives can come to the space and say, 'This is how this collection looks; here are all the tear sheets', and they can replicate that vision within a virtual world. Suddenly, all bets are off and everything's possible.

Martina Tiefenthaler, chief creative officer, Balenciaga: There were a lot of things that Epic Games were doing, that, not being serious gamers, we didn't even know existed. It was a long process, with lots of meetings, and then *Fortnite* transformed our discussions into something that Demna or I could never have even understood because it is not part of our know-how. In a way, everything I look at sits in a library in my mind, and having seen this digitalized version of our clothing I now dream differently in the real world. I say 'dream' because this is about the imagination – now that I know a rendered shoe can look a certain way, I might try to make a real-life shoe that looks rendered.

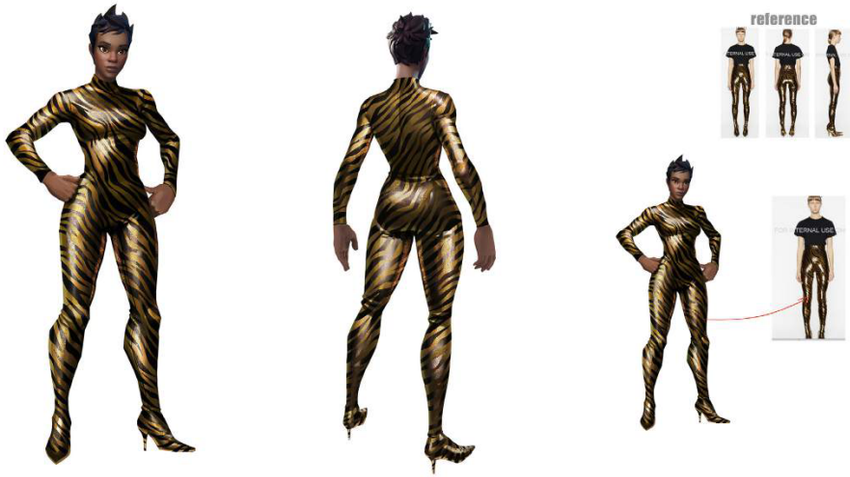
The idea of fashion and gaming collaborations is not new, but it's hard not to feel that there is something groundbreaking in the scope of what *Fortnite* and Balenciaga created. What makes this project less of a gimmick and more the future of brand marketing?

Emily Levy: In addition to the outfits we put into the Item Shop, the idea was to create a virtual world in *Fortnite*'s Creative Mode that really spoke to the authenticity of the Balenciaga brand, so we have this strange, futuristic city with the Balenciaga store in it and we put this 3D digital billboard into *Fortnite* above the store. It was the same billboard created in Unreal that was used in real-world advertising in the four different cities. It was also really a celebration of self-expression: players did not have to purchase the Balenciaga outfits in order to participate, which was very important. Players could wear a default skin they had received four years ago when they first downloaded the game. What really mattered was that creators became part of a living, breathing fashion campaign, a community-driven lookbook of images of them wearing an outfit, being true to who they are, self-expressing around the *Fortnite* ecosystem, and then to post those photos on social media. Those images were then regularly placed on the billboards



Ramirez wearing the Unchained Outfit inspired by a look from the Balenciaga Autumn/Winter 2021 collection.

Development of the Shady Doggo Outfit based on the physical *Fortnite* × Balenciaga capsule collection, 2021.



Development of the Fashion Banshee Outfit.

Speed Sneaker Pickaxe.

in the map, so players could see their avatars wearing an outfit up on a billboard in their favourite part of *Fortnite*. It was an ever-evolving, user-generated content campaign where players were not only the artists and the photographers behind the campaign, but also the models.

It all brings to life what the future looks like for gaming platforms, technology platforms within fashion, and a future where brands and creators are building digital assets transferable across various digital uses and media, from internal digital design and development, to gaming, to advertising, to the creation of virtual and physical items.

How do you measure success in this new world?

these pieces made us feel like we had succeeded in creating something that felt innovative, boundary-pushing, but also authentic for players.

How could technology such as Unreal Engine be a creative game changer for the fashion industry as a whole?

Sallyann Houghton: Compared to other industries, such as the automotive industry for example, fashion is relatively late to this technological revolution. Perhaps because, historically, fashion has had a hands-on approach, which is kind of its beauty. Fashion has appreciated innovation for a long time, but it has always been used as a way to be unique in the moment. So holograms have been used on fashion shows and robots have been used by Alexander McQueen, but it was leveraged as a marketing tool, then thrown aside. Unreal Engine now presents a huge opportunity for the fashion industry. It's a game changer for the way shows are produced, how content is shared with the community, and how the meaning of a brand or collection can be communicated. These experiences are multi-faceted – they don't live exclusively in a virtual space, nor exclusively in camera as VFX, or the real world. That is what we mean by the metaverse: it's a place where all these different approaches overlap. Shows are great – and people love shows – but we've learned that shows can go so much further and wider if they are paired with some kind of digital element. Layering these different techniques is the future of fashion and will change how the industry will be perceived by a wider audience.

Will we see more and more people using Unreal Engine within fashion?

Sallyann Houghton: Anyone can download Unreal Engine for free. Basically, anyone can pick up these tools and run with them. Our approach to the creative industry is to give people the tools to do exciting stuff, and then we invest a lot of energy producing educational resources, so that the talent can meet the incredible volume of demand for real-time skills. We are very much at a time where there's an explosion in the need for virtual spaces, the technology has come of age, and now we need to push through the talent. In six months it will be much easier to find an Unreal artist, because there are so many people moving through that learning process. Our education team comes together with colleges and schools around the world, helping them implement Unreal Engine into their course structure. I am very proud to have a close relationship with London's Royal College of Art, which has a vibrant fashion department and is using MetaHuman Creator, an Unreal Engine tool that allows anyone to create believable digital humans in minutes. Lots of the final student pieces last year used Unreal Engine.

'Having seen this digitalized version of our clothing I now dream differently in the real world. I might try to make a real-life shoe that looks rendered.'

Emily Levy: One way is whether it felt like an authentic experience for players – and we were completely blown away by community engagement around all parts of the activation. To us, that is a sign that it was successful. Players loved the outfits and the detailing and thought this was a super cool new way to express themselves. Based on where I saw the 3D billboards in Seoul, London, New York, and Tokyo popping up on the Internet, they took off in their own right and had their own viral moment and got the Internet buzzing, which was really cool to see. Also, the community-driven lookbook inside of *Fortnite* was a really incredible experience for players. The kinds of reactions we see on Twitter when players see their art as part of the in-game experience for the first time were really mind-blowing. All

It's feels like we've all been tiptoeing into the metaverse for some time, and maybe with this project we're finally discovering that it's arrived: 400 million avatars in *Fortnite* dressed up, walking past a virtual Balenciaga store. Is this the new normal? Where are we in the metaverse right now?

Sallyann Houghton: What is about to change is the way that fashion designs

meet the outside world. For instance, you design the most beautiful dress, and it has a real-life version. Moving forward, it may also have a digital version that is simpler to begin with, but then grows and morphs and responds to your interactions. Now a garment begins to tell a story; it has a narrative all its own. Our collaboration with Balenciaga has been incredibly important because it has pushed the boundaries of marketing campaigns, of how you can collaborate across platforms. It gave us a glimpse into what the campaigns of the future could look like.

Cédric Charbit: In the same quarter of this year that Demna presented the first couture collection – without music, in a formal and intimate manner, for an extremely limited audience, in the Avenue Georges V salon – we had the *Fortnite* project. It's been a unique experience to have created this platform for Balenciaga that allows us to communicate through craft and savoir-faire and heritage in one part of the business, and in another through *Fortnite*. Demna's language is completely in step with the era in which we live. That's what I find so compelling about this moment in time for Balenciaga.

Sallyann Houghton: People are not necessarily seeing this as a strictly games-based partnership; they are seeing it as an *authentic* metaverse partnership and experiencing how multifaceted these interactive worlds and digital assets already are. They are beginning to develop a metaverse strategy, asking questions about how they enter this space and what they do next. I fundamentally believe that for us to move towards the metaverse, the journey will be built upon a gazillion collaborations. I think there'll be an avalanche in the next 12 to 18 months of incredible fashion-focused metaverse executions. For example, [Epic Games division] Quixel Megascans[2] has a huge library of sophisticated backdrops that the fashion industry will be blown away by once it realizes that they exist. If you want to have your fashion show in a canyon, there's a 5K, photoreal Grand Canyon at your fingertips. There are all these weird and wonderful places that brands can pull from a database really easily. Then they can build on top of the chosen image so it's unique and owned by that brand, that label and that collection. And then when you've finished with it, you pop it in the archive, and every single show, every single execution, every single virtual world you have created can just be put on your metaverse map. Suddenly, the brand is developing this whole specific landscape in which it can live in perpetuity, and which contains every vision it's had. In 2022, we will see the digital meet the physical space more fully. Collaborating with game platforms is wonderful, but brands now need to think about their long-term digital existence. In the end, the metaverse will bring the fashion industry together, and brands will all live side by side.

Demna Gvasalia: These days, we can no longer be sat here thinking, 'Pop culture is something separate.' It's totally part of today's luxury fashion industry; it's like bringing a sneaker into a luxury brand's product range. There are all these other facets of pop culture and for me, *Fortnite* and the metaverse are just two segments of that. It's all just part of the language that a modern brand has to speak today.

1. Lachlan (né Lachlan Ross Power) is a 26-year-old Australian gamer and Internet personality known for his YouTube video-game commentaries, particularly *Fortnite*. His main YouTube channel has 14.7 million subscribers and is approaching 5 billion views. He also runs PWR, a professional *Fortnite* gaming team, and an entertainment and apparel brand. In October 2020, he received the ultimate *Fortnite* honour when he was awarded his own skin in the game.

2. Quixel Megascans' visual library is made up of digital assets that can be used in 3D world building. The images range from large-scale backgrounds of planets and landscapes to details such as petals, leaves, and metallic light fixtures.

Doggo billboard in Piccadilly Square, London.

Doggo billboard in Shibuya Crossing, Tokyo.

All images courtesy of Epic

Linda Loppa & Demna Gvasalia

In 2006, Linda Loppa left the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp after nearly 25 years as head of the fashion department. Still recognized as one of the most important figures in fashion education, she influenced generations of future designers during her time in Antwerp, including Raf Simons, Veronique Branquinho, Haider Ackermann, Kris Van Assche, and, in her final year, a young Demna Gvasalia. Loppa had first attended the Academy as a student in the late 1960s and returned to teach in 1981, while also running Loppa, her legendary Antwerp boutique, opened in 1978 and known for its avant-garde selection of designers including Helmut Lang and Claude Montana. Loppa and Gvasalia have kept in touch during the 15 years since they both said farewell to the Academy, so he suggested they catch up on the phone for *System* to discuss their time in – and since – Antwerp, the point of fashion schools, and the art of learning when to stop.

Linda Loppa: Hello, Demna, how are you?
Demna Gvasalia: I'm fine. How are you? It's so nice to have this conversation! Where are you living now?
Linda: In Florence. We lived in Paris for two years, but we were missing something…
Demna: The weather? I also like a warm climate; I need sun and the sea, sometimes.
Linda: Actually, just today I was thinking that Florence is becoming a luxury capital, with expensive living, nice palaces and luxury housing, and maybe Paris is more like a provincial city, where neighbourhoods have more of local feeling.
Demna: I agree. You know, I like Paris as a city, though. I also like New York; I was there recently and although it's not *my* city, I feel like it has great energy and it's fun.
Linda: Last time we were in Paris we visited the Palais de Tokyo for the Anne Imhof exhibition. It was amazing!
Demna: Did you visit Pinault's Bourse de Commerce?
Linda: Yes – wonderful!
Demna: A lot of young kids are moving from London to Paris right now. There is a kind of new energy here.

'One day, you looked at what I was working on, and you said, 'Demna, think about who is going to wear your garment and who is going to pay for it.''

Linda: I had a similar sort of feeling in 2015, when my husband and I moved to Paris from Florence around the time of the Bataclan attack. It was a kind of emotional moment, when it felt like the people of Paris needed a hug, a friendly gesture – a human gesture.
Demna: That's a bit like the Covid situation, too – we need more community. We have learned something about communicating in a different kind of time with the lockdowns. There was a new feeling. In the first weeks of lockdown, when I was at home with my husband, I was kind of depressed, but then I started dressing up, wearing high heels, shirts, reinventing my wardrobe. It was so much fun!
Linda: I felt an urge to write. I felt stimulated to change the world… of fashion, at least. I thought I would try to change the world on my own, but suddenly I connected with many friends all over the world through Zoom, and that gave me a new feeling of community. I could connect again, digitally, and I became more aware of remote working, even enjoying the new situation.
Demna: It was more of a trauma for me, to be honest. How do you explain to someone over Zoom how to make a sleeve or shoulder line? English is not my first language, and it's not the first language of the people in the atelier, either. It was like, 'Could you pin the sleeve a bit higher…? Could you…?'
Linda: How funny! Maybe you should write a book, a manual: how to work online, with this new language. How to explain over Zoom how to make a garment. How to cut a sleeve on Zoom!
Demna: [Laughs] Good idea! I was so happy we still actually managed to do a show this October. Well, not a full fashion show, more like a gathering with friends.

Linda: You know, I can see seven, eight airplanes in the sky right now; we are definitely feeling freer after Covid, aren't we? Making connections. And Demna, you are a super-good connector! You connect all generations, all styles, using all kind of different media!
Demna: I do like to play with new media, to experiment.
Linda: At home, I received that virtual-reality box and the scent by [olfactory artist] Sissel Tolaas for the Autumn/Winter 2021 show. It's great!
Demna: We've also started with gaming. It's a bit of an expensive project, but we said, 'OK, let's give it a try.'

The best 'French' fries ever.

'These images represent Antwerp to me, and since Linda Loppa is directly connected to my time in Antwerp, I think they are pretty symbolic.'

Demna Gvasalia

The Royal Academy building that housed the fashion school and in which Vincent Van Gogh learned to paint.

A Stockman mannequin was the first thing I had to buy when I moved to Antwerp, and a huge investment for me back then.

+1, a student magazine that we created as a group graduate project.

A blue IKEA bag like those that I and all the fashion students would use to transport the Stockman and our voluminous prototypes.

An old found postcard of Antwerp.

Linda: It's amazing how you have been able to capture different layers of society and different generations. Young kids know you and Balenciaga! That's really a gift. And I want to ask you more generally, what are your thoughts about fashion education? Fashion schools are a kind of passage between one life and another, aren't they?

Demna: They are a sort of twilight zone, in which you transit through some kind of creative adolescence. They are places where you look for yourself, but never really find your true creative core. But it is also a time when you can learn how to dream and – with the right guidance – to express that dream through a vision. I think there are way too many fashion schools that give false hopes and career illusions to young people, just because they need the numbers, since they function as businesses first and foremost. One really good fashion school would be more than enough, globally. A really good one, though. And that does not exist today, in my opinion.

Linda: I agree. Close all the fashion schools and start from scratch! One school would be enough. It could be a non-zone, were you could find yourself.

Demna: You can *try* finding yourself, but because you are young, inexperienced and vulnerable, you may end up losing yourself in the process. Which is OK; it's part of a creative process to be constantly searching for yourself. It makes you evolve; otherwise it can get pretty boring. And that process has to continue post-fashion school, throughout your whole career.

Linda: What would you change in fashion education? Do you feel that all these structures are old-fashioned?

Demna: I had a wonderful time, but I think the schools are stuck in their attempts to modernize. It's pretentious. Ultimately, opening social-media accounts and institutionally teaching students how to apply for jobs is not enough. The main *raison d'être* of fashion education should be to trigger the creative thought process and to explain how to come up with ideas that someone else will want and love. Maybe there shouldn't even be teachers as such, but rather a free space in which young creatives can brainstorm, have fun and inspire each other. Loads of artistic workshops where people work in teams and just constantly come up with ideas, no matter whether they're good or not. Someone should be there to support and organize, but there shouldn't be a judgemental leader with subjective and personal aesthetic taste. That said, there should be product-oriented coaching, so students know how to make an actual product. It's not about making crazy garments nobody will wear; it's about who would buy your garment. You know, there was a moment at the Academy I will never forget. One day during my graduate year, you looked at some of the things I was working on, which, honestly, were pretty bad, and you said, 'Demna, think about who is going to wear your garment and who is going to pay for it.' You told me that if I could imagine someone who would actually wear it, who would love it enough to buy it, I should go ahead and do it. That changed my perception of the responsibility of being a designer. That's always in the back of my mind when I'm working, and I believe it truly helped to shape my design approach in the years after Antwerp. It was my main design guideline when I started Vetements, for example – and it still is, more than ever.

Linda: Oh! Maybe I said that because I was also a retailer…

Demna: Yes, but not only that. You really made me think about my responsibility as a designer.

Linda: Wow, that's great! But you're right, it is not about 'me', but about 'we'. Now you are at the top, what's next?

Demna: I don't know! What do people do when they get to the top of something? I guess they enjoy the view. [Laughs] I'm rarely fully satisfied with myself, so there is always another hill to climb, and I'll keep doing that as long as I have fun and it makes me happy. But the view is nice, too – it feels a lot like freedom. Do you go to Antwerp often?

Linda: No, not really. Can you imagine: you and I left Antwerp in 2006, so we have that in common.

Demna: I don't go back, either, because I want to keep my memories. I'm a bit nostalgic, and I feel it changed a bit. I was so free in Antwerp, like living in this inter-zone, that kind of twilight zone. I could experiment without stress and enjoy life without thinking about the future. Of course, in the end I felt I needed a job and I sent about 90 portfolios to companies.

Linda: Society changed, and we changed. You graduated in 2006 and built a career in 15 years after school. We could say you are an example for young kids – but will they have the patience that you had?

'Too many fashion schools give false hope to young people, just because they need the numbers, since they function as businesses first and foremost.'

Demna: Patience is not my forte, actually, and I think it would not be enough, today. What is super important is pertinence, and not being afraid to fail. You know, it's about being able to fall down, but then stand up again and keep moving forward. You have to be able to do that over and over again and keep going, keep believing in yourself if you are really into something. Most importantly, do not listen to anyone who tries to scare or demotivate you. In fashion, forward is the only correct direction. That's how you get the desirability I have to feel in fashion. So if I don't feel like I'm still passionate about my job any more, I will stop. I'm absolutely not going to work into my 80s like Karl Lagerfeld.

Linda: Never say never! [Laughs] Is competition important for young designers? Do schools prepare them for those big moments?

Demna: Competition can be very healthy and can push your creativity into unknown and exciting places, but it should never be about proving anything to anyone. That's when it becomes toxic. Fashion schools are usually too good at creating that type of toxic competitive environment. Sissel Tolaas once told me that, 'Creative collaboration is a new, modern form of competition.' I truly think that there is something pretty genius about that idea.

Linda: That is an interesting idea. What I find amazing is how you've closed the gap between pop culture and luxury. Is fashion a spectacle?

Demna: At the moment, it's a bit of a cheap spectacle with loads of meaningless 'special effects' and brouhaha. It's pretty much a pretentious circus and it's mainly money-oriented. At the same time, fashion has turned into part of the entertainment business, too. That is OK, but I'm afraid it's losing touch with its most important commodity: the clothes. I am so bored with what I see happening at the moment. That's why I just do my thing and what I like. I'm excited by the hope that the general mediocrity, boredom and flatness that dominates fashion today will trigger the release of new creative energy and ideas.

Linda: Is the future bright?

Demna: To be honest, it feels like the future is very, very cloudy right now. But I am an optimist – I believe the sun is always shining behind any scary cloud. I have a lot of hope in the younger generation and their intellectual capacity to understand the importance of the change we all need to make so the future can be bright. Having said that, I am also afraid, but then I think it's good to be afraid. We need that if we want to change something.

Linda: But is fashion going in the right direction?

Demna: Fashion is going in very much the wrong direction, since its main destination right now is the bank – it needs to make a U-turn. To survive this ride, its main orientation needs to be creativity – it needs to stop working for merchandisers, market requests and financial goals. Those things are never going to help advance fashion! They'll only ensure its degradation into a dysfunctional, boring, repetitive and uninspiring slot machine.

Linda: Are you happy?

Demna: I feel the happiest I have ever felt, because I have learned how to love myself: I am a designer, I know that I can innovate – and I enjoy it.

Linda: I wanted to ask you: how do you feel about second-hand shopping?

Demna: I like it! It's fantastic because kids are doing it to save the world. They think about the planet and sustainability while they do it. They can wear couture without it costing the earth.

Linda: I am not convinced. If they buy a vintage leather jacket, it's probably made with the skin of a mistreated animal. And people think they're buying a unique item, but it's still been mass-produced. It is more like a trend, I guess. Like when in the 1970s it was fun and experimental to wear hippie or vintage clothes. I studied in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts for seven years – three years of artistic humanities and four years of fashion design – and it was so much fun! It was end of the 1960s, beginning of the 1970s. There was a sort of post-Covid excitement. The Academy and Antwerp made me the person I am today. But now let's close all the fashion schools *and* all the vintage stores! Oh, sorry – I am too rebellious and radical! Hey Demna, thank you for this great conversation!

Demna: Linda, when you are in Paris, call me and we'll get a coffee.

Linda: Oh, with pleasure. Big hug. Have a nice evening.

'If I don't feel like I'm still passionate about my job any more, I will stop. I'm not going to work into my 80s like Karl Lagerfeld.'

‘It’s like a members’ club, but for non-members only.’

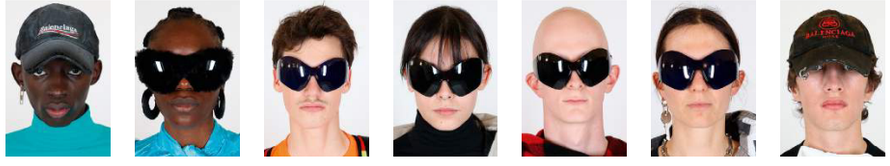
If you want to understand how Demna Gvasalia sees the world, take a look at the people who model his clothes.

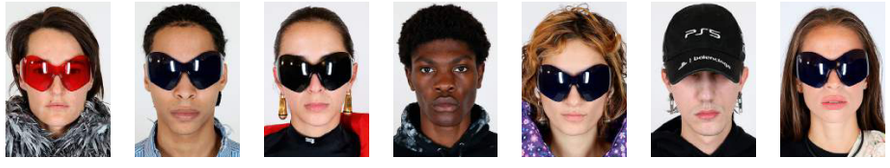
By Rahim Attarzadeh

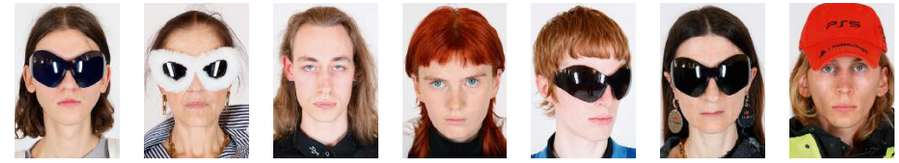
Summer 2022

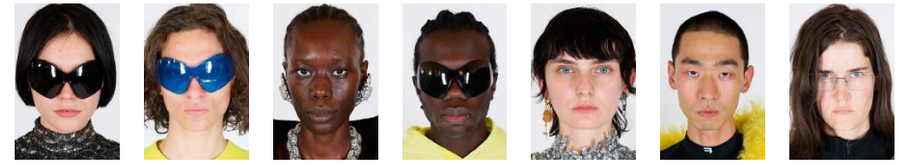
Spring 2022

Winter 2021





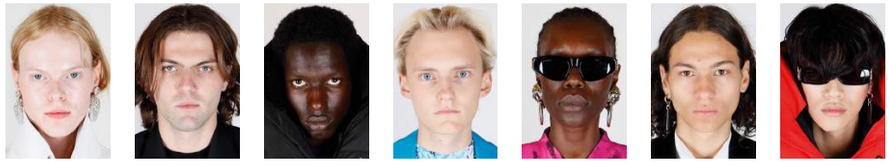


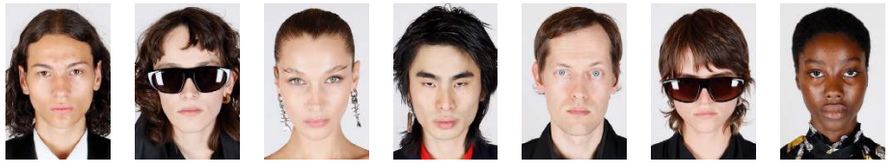


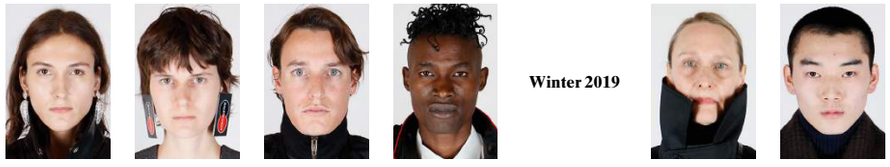
Summer 2021

Winter 2020

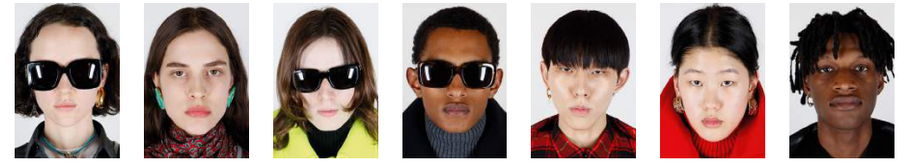
Summer 2020

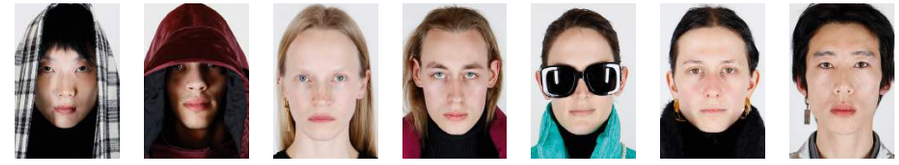




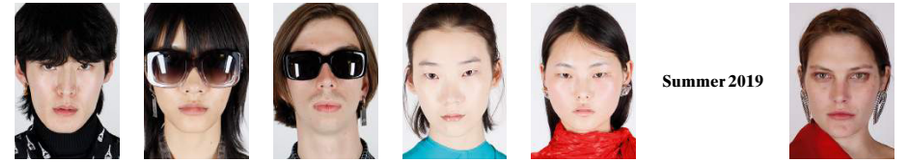


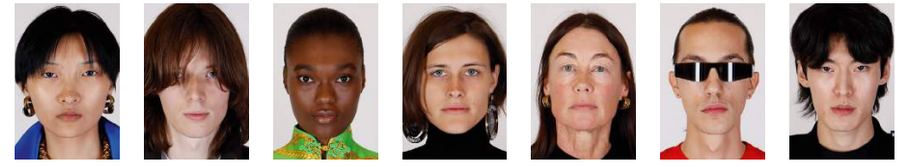
Winter 2019

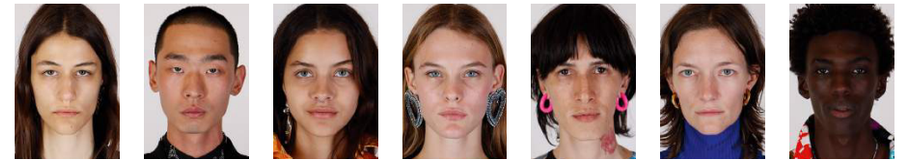




Summer 2019





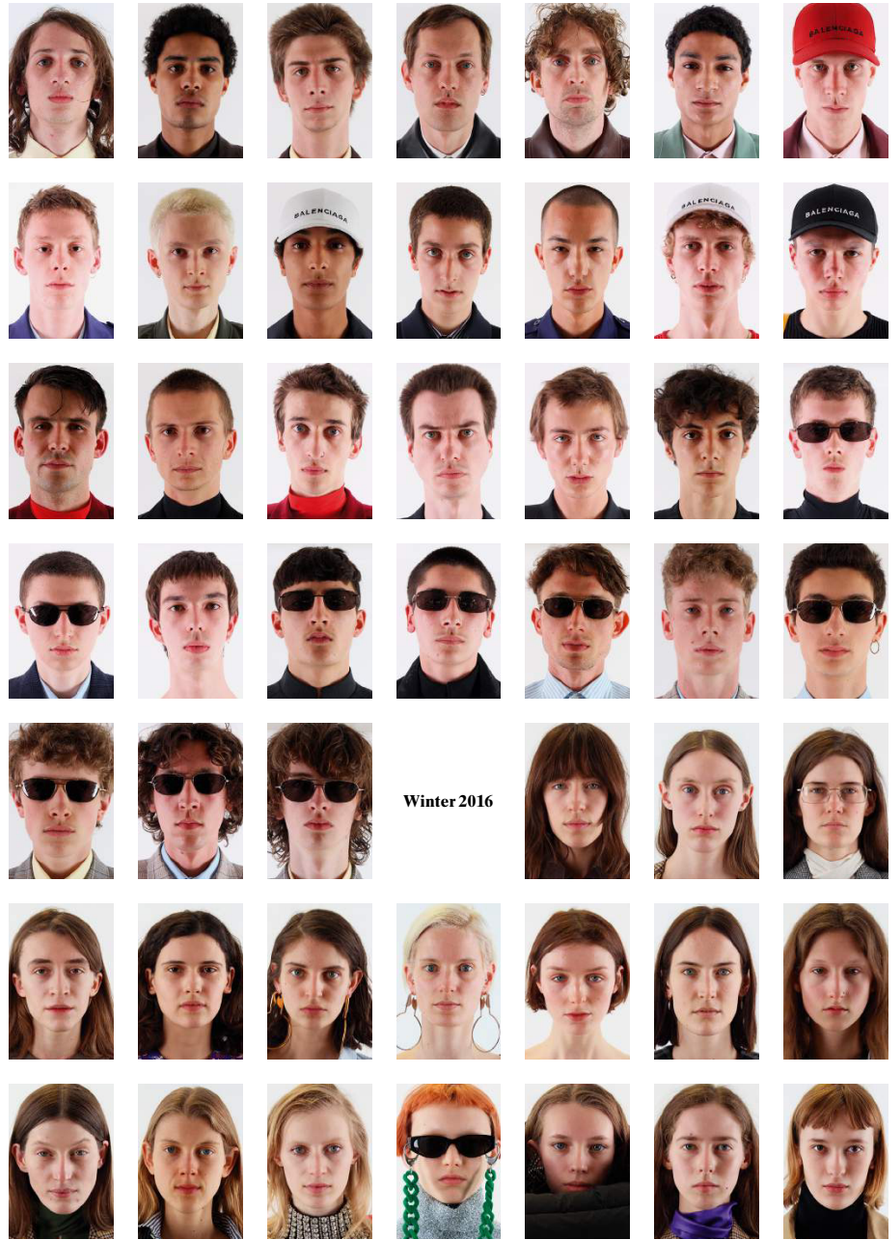


Summer 2018

Winter 2017

Menswear
Winter 2017

Summer 2017
Menswear
Summer 2017


Winter 2016

All images courtesy of Balenciaga

Since the very first look of his debut Balenciaga runway show in March 2016 – a grey padded hip suit on the bespectacled painter and musician Eliza Douglas – Demna Gvasalia has cast his spotlight on an ever-growing cast of unconventional characters.

At Balenciaga, the models are cast not just for what they look like but who they are, what they do, and what they can *mean*. Whether they're Douglas – cloned 44 times for the Spring 2022 digital show – dads from Zurich, Isabelle Huppert, mechanical engineers, bodybuilders, or a heart-throb such as Justin Bieber, each model's look and personal style, their idiosyncrasies, and their life stories help Gvasalia define the sense of each piece in each collection, much as they later do for those attending the runway shows, and the audience at large.

'I don't really have lots of friends, so if I had a magic power, it would be to suddenly have *this* big group of friends. They're the people I want to dress.'

The recent Spring/Summer 2022 show – which saw many of the House's favourite models joined on the fake-real red carpet by some of Gvasalia's Balenciaga colleagues, a smattering of fashion-industry faces, and celebrities including Lewis Hamilton, Elliot Page and Cardi B – was a typically ingenious play of unexpected appearances (in all senses of the word). The multilayered spectacle was another chapter in the house's sly method of using casting to add character-driven narratives, depth, and often, some fun to each collection. (Giving Marge and Homer Simpson their catwalk debut was the show's *coup de maître*.)

The task of finding the right faces to wear the right clothes falls to Balenciaga's trio of independent scouts: Franziska Bachofen-Echt, Léopold Duchemin, and Eva Gödel, the founder of model agency Tomorrow Is Another Day. The three work alongside Gvasalia and his long-term right hand (and Balenciaga's chief creative officer) Martina Tiefenthaler to hone an atypical casting vision that has helped redefine what a major luxury house's models can look like. As people of other shapes, ages and backgrounds have hit the Balenciaga runway since 2016, the shows have become sites of ever-increasing multiplicity (an evolution, it should be noted, partly driven by the public criticism of those early shows' lack of ethnic diversity). *System* spoke to all five and discussed the meaning of beauty, eradicating hierarchies, and why a happy model is a better model.

Demna Gvasalia: For me, casting at Balenciaga is about assembling a diverse group of people who I'd like to hang out with. I don't really have a lot of friends in my life, so if I had a magic power, it would be to suddenly have *this* big group of friends. Because these are the people I want to dress. I don't like to call them models because many of them have jobs, very often in creative fields, and most of the time they are not professional models. There could be a waiter, then a gallery owner, an art critic, a banker, and then a superstar. What they do is just as important as what they look like or their personal style. In many of the show notes we've included what their jobs are: 'Eliza, singer, artist…' They are people of all ages, who have their own opinions, their own style, and their own ideas. Often, we'll give them a collection look to wear and they'll be like, 'Really? I was kind of thinking it would work better with that piece over there…' They style their own look and how they want to wear it. It's so personal. They're all so different and they're all such individuals, and over the years they've really become part of the family. Literally, in five minutes' time, once I've finished this interview, I'm going to see a load of them for a fitting session downstairs, and it's like catching up with friends and meeting new ones. I'm going to do a first fitting this afternoon with a physics teacher, which is so exciting. We hang out; we listen to music; we pick out looks to try on. They love coming here. They're excited about what they're going to wear next, and what the format of the show will be.

Martina Tiefenthaler: We use casting as a way to say what we're about – or what we're *not* about. It's a fantastic tool that everyone in the fashion industry has – which some know how to use and some don't. You really need to spend time on it. So many houses hire casting directors and outsource that process. Here it is different: we don't have a casting director; we have the scouts. Eva has been in this line of business forever, but Léopold and Franziska haven't. We just knew them, they know what we're looking for, and because we don't outsource, we are able to communicate our vision in an extremely sincere and authentic way. It comes more directly from the minds of the same people who design the clothes that the cast members will be wearing. It is all one.

How did you begin working with Demna and Martina?

Franziska Bachofen-Echt: Everything happened organically. I was invited to come in as a model for a Vetements casting many years ago and later I was asked to come in again for Balenciaga. I started talking to Demna; he thought my Instagram was funny and I became one of the Instagram contributors way back when they started their new social-media strategy. Eventually I texted Martina and said, 'Listen, I have a lot of interesting people I would like to propose for the casting.' Soon afterwards I got a phone call saying they wanted me to be part of the casting team.

Eva Gödel: When I was 15 or so, I worked after school at a skate shop in Cologne and we had all this clubwear like Hysteric Glamour, 3000, Liquid Sky and Gimme Five. All the kids came to the shop, because when you bought those brands you would get into the clubs, even when you were young. Techno was big in Germany at the time; it was 1994 to 1997, and I would photograph the kids coming to the shop and put the Polaroids in the window. That became a reference for me. And I loved *Kids* and *Gummo*,[1] Harmony Korine's film, and I remember thinking how interesting the casts looked.

Was there much of a fashion scene in Cologne at the time?

Eva: There still isn't really any fashion in Cologne; it's all about art. For example, Rosemarie Trockel[2] is a really old friend of mine, and she was actually the first person to book models from me, for her photography work. In 2000 or 2001, Raf Simons was my favourite designer and I used to go to his stock sale in Antwerp, back when I was a student and he was there himself. I asked for his email address, because he had no website at the time, and then I scouted boys and emailed him my selection. A few days later, he asked if I could bring those five boys to Paris for his show the following week. So I rented a van, drove the boys to Paris and they walked the show. The next season, Rick Owens contacted me. I don't know how he had heard of me, but I was excited that he had, and I had boys walking his first ready-to-wear show in Paris. At the time, it was totally anarchic. It was refreshing because it was mainly all supermodels back then, and these boys I scouted added a whole different dimension to menswear. One by one, more clients came. When Kim Jones started his own collection, he contacted me. Each show was like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, adding to my agency and database. One time I was in a bar with some of the boys I had scouted and we met Lotta Volkova. She wanted to know which agency they belonged to; I told her they were with me and the next night they modelled for the presentation of her label Lotta Skeletrix in a pub. Then, when Demna started Vetements, he began booking models from me for the shows, and that's continued ever since.

Léopold Duchemin: I grew up in the middle of nowhere in the south of France, in this vineyard far away from everything. Fashion was something I could never understand. When I turned 14, I moved away and this opened up different avenues. In 2011, I interned with Marie-Amélie Sauvé, and I was a student at the Duperré School of Applied Arts in Paris.[3] Demna and I had a lot of mutual friends and went to the same parties. He was just part of my environment. In 2015, I was asked to be a fitting model for Vetements for a season. In 2018, he asked my best friend, Dora Diamant, and I to work on the casting for the Autumn/Winter Vetements show. Neither of us had ever worked in casting before, but Demna had the intuition that we would have an eye for it. The next season, he asked us to scout for Balenciaga. We worked side-by-side until Dora passed away in 2020.[4] She had the most special vision, which I'm trying to channel through my own work; she had such a strong capacity for seeing beauty in people. She would have crushes on people all the time and worked in a really emotional way, which is almost non-existent in casting. Demna has never said this to me, but I think our view on friendship and how we perceived new people, our way of networking organically was something that resonated with him. For me, his vision felt really close to the way my friends and I were dressing. He was the first designer I felt an allegiance to. It was like a cult, at the start – like a members' club, but for non-members only.

Balenciaga often adopts a conceptual, narrative or storytelling approach to casting its different shows. Is this something Demna and Martina brief you on or is the casting and scouting process done separately?

Franziska: Eva, Léopold and I each receive an initial brief from Demna and Martina, with room for personal interpretation. There is a clear, mutual understanding of what we are looking for, which makes it easy for me to feel comfortable enough to follow my gut and approach the task. I forward suggestions to the team on a weekly basis; Demna then tells me who he likes. From there an internal team takes over and takes care of logistics.

Eva: There are seasons when the brief is really specific and other seasons when they just tell me what the project will be like and what their ideas are. I send suggestions, then they select. One of the really good things about Demna and Martina is that they know exactly what they want. They are so idiosyncratic in that way. I can trust them when they say they want this model or that person; they never change their mind just before the show, which a lot of other clients do. They have an idea in mind as to which characters they need for the specific clothes and they develop an outfit for each character. I actually just found my briefing notes of the show with the models walking through water [Balenciaga, Autumn/Winter 2020-2021], and Demna was looking for classic, biblical faces, and darker, devilish looks. He said, 'Think David Bowie aged 25.' Sporty, athletic, a 'super-hetero' hockey player, bodybuilders, football players, monks, priests, nuns, super-androgynous boys and girls, and then super-slim body silhouettes to super-big body silhouettes.

Martina: We really briefed the scouts for that collection. We were like, 'It's very dark; it's going to be in water; it's going to be tense and inspired by Catholic clothing and nuns; it's going to have this kind of heavy, covered vibe.' Then there have been other seasons when we've said, for example, 'a wide mix of all the different areas of the world'. For the fitting we are doing for our next show, Demna just said, 'Strong people.' [Laughs] That was the only brief! Eva said, 'Can you be more specific? Physically strong? Mentally strong? Emotionally strong?' And we were like, 'No, we can't!' [Laughs] But at other times we have been super precise, like when we worked with Ralf Moeller[5] for the water show, and asked our scouts, 'Please try to find bodybuilders.' We've worked with the scouts for so long that they really understand what works and what doesn't.

Léopold: That show with the water was a very specific moment in my life. Dora was really sick, and though she was very involved, she couldn't come to the show itself. It's not one I will ever forget, also because it was extremely dramatic and visually beautiful. Walking on water – that's something only Demna would dare to do. The details of a show are super top secret until the very last moment. It's not that I don't want to know – they don't tell me, and I don't ask. Because I don't get information about what it's going to look like – what the set or the lighting will be like – I just embrace it. On the day of the show, I get so excited; it is like Christmas. I never know what form it will take. I love that so, so much; it keeps me on my toes.

In what ways do you think Balenciaga's casting has progressed the conversation in terms of who can walk in these kinds of shows?

Martina: Casting at Balenciaga represents freedom: the freedom to show our understanding of beauty and human beings. I'm so happy about the way we find people; it's such a nice way of doing it. We want distinctive people; it's not about looking for standardized measurements. I had experiences in companies before where every model had to be the same height, and we were measuring the distance from the floor to the hem of the pants on every model as it had to be the same. I was like, 'My God, what are we doing? I don't want to show a collection on clones.' [Laughs] And then, of course, we did exactly that with the 'clone' runway show at Balenciaga [Spring 2022]!

Eva: Back in the day, the perfect model image was the Davidoff Cool Water guy, but luckily we have moved so far away from that now.

Franziska: People who have never been seen on a catwalk before suddenly get this platform. There are some older people doing the runway now who tell us, 'I'd never have thought that I would be having this kind of exposure now!' I don't know if designers like [Vienna-based label] Wendy Jim would have found the space to grow if it hadn't partly been for the direction of casting that Vetements and Balenciaga have taken.

Martina: The way Demna and I choose models and style them together, we are creating characters. That's why we often go back to all these cultural references we work with. Maybe someone looks a bit more punk, the other looks like an art collector – and she actually *is* an art collector! That, for me, is the best moment: when I see the collection,

'It could be a waiter, a gallery owner, an art critic, a banker, or a superstar. I'm about to do a first fitting this afternoon with a physics teacher.'

'Often, we'll give them a collection look and they'll be like, '*Really*? I was kind of thinking it would work better with that piece over there."

I have all the shoes and accessories, and I see them come together on all these real people.

Léopold: Demna is always questioning society, so I look for characters who can depict different aspects of society. I look for people who have something to say but who wouldn't traditionally be put on a runway – I try to give them a 'visual microphone'.

How do you find new faces who could embody the Balenciaga 'character' for each show?

Léopold: I'm always looking for profiles of people who could embody the archetypal Balenciaga character, always trying to be attentive to people I meet or see on the streets, or on social media. It's instinct; it's an attitude. It could just be the way they move or talk. I have been doing it for so long now that it has altered my perception entirely. I used to be in my own bubble, but now if I enter a restaurant I immediately scan the room. I am always spotting people; I don't always go up to them, but I can't not do it. It can be someone any age, man or woman. If it is someone on the street, I know exactly what to say now, but I used to be so awkward! If I am sent somewhere for scouting, I go out and meet people and add them on social media. Social media is always involved, even if I am scouting people on the street.

Franziska: At the moment, I find most people online. Street casting has become trickier with the pandemic: you can see someone who might work, but then you ask them to remove their mask and suddenly you are looking at someone completely different from who you were anticipating. The right people can be anywhere really. I recently watched this very scary horror film, *The Conjuring 3*. Eugenie Bondurant plays a wicked witch in it, and I was like, 'Oh my God, she is so amazing!' So I contacted her on Instagram, and luckily, she replied and accepted the offer to walk the Balenciaga show.

Eva: I just can't do it through photos or Instagram; I have to meet people in person. How can you have an instinct when you're looking at people through the monosyllabic Instagram lens? I go to events where there could be people with the style I'm looking for, or gigs with people who share the same music taste as me. Mainly, I look at what is happening on the street. The street is the catalyst; it's also the best place to see older people who I find interesting. One thing that has changed is that for years the only applicants to my agency were people I didn't think were that interesting and who just wanted to be models. It was soulless. Now, the applicants are often people who identify with what we are doing here. Young people are more aware of fashion than they used to be, too. If I scouted a boy on the street in 2001, when I started my agency, he wouldn't know what Louis Vuitton was. Whereas these days, if I go scouting at a festival wearing a Balenciaga cap, the kids are all like, 'Wow, cool hat, how much do you want for it?' With Balenciaga, Demna gave fashion back to young people.

Do you prefer to go out on location-centric trips, where the people you cast are obviously very specific to the location? Do you have favourite cities for scouting?

Léopold: I've always been fascinated with Helsinki; it is just such a specific vibe there. New York is amazing because it is so diverse and multifaceted. People there have such great style and attitude: the way they walk in the clothes, the way they hold themselves. The clothing amplifies their fearlessness, but it's not the reason they are fearless to begin with.

Eva: I love all the different European countries. When we had the first Balenciaga men's show, it was all about Europe for the casting, all kinds of mixed Europeans. I had a boy from Scotland who was half-Indian and half-Scottish. We want that mix of nations – authentic diversity from a borderless Europe.

Given that many of the casting are not professional models, how do they react to the experience?

Léopold: All of the people I have scouted who have gone on to do the show have told me it was one of the best experiences they've ever had in modelling; they are really taken care of. Balenciaga is such a different brand, compared to the others. There is this overwhelming sense of pride when walking a Balenciaga show, and that is because of the platform Demna gives them.

Eva: Balenciaga really takes the time with the fittings and they hire me to train the models to walk, so they can exhibit the confidence that Demna's clothes give them. It doesn't matter if someone is already known or a big art collector or has never done anything like this in their life before – it really touches them. Even successful lawyers or architects tell me later that they are grateful, that it made them feel good about themselves. Demna doesn't take models for one season and then drop them, either. He asks them to come back, so it feels like friends and family. Like, even if there is this myriad of individualities expressed through the casting, the whole Balenciaga cast fits together like a family, like a gang or a tribe, together. A single gang going down the runway, even if they're all different – with Demna as the creative glue.

Franziska: After every show, video or lookbook, I feel like it was such a good experience for everyone involved. To be a part of something like the 'red carpet' show, for example – walking on the red carpet, with the models, designers, celebrities, friends and family was such a surreal and fun experience for everyone! Balenciaga is going to become bigger than fashion. It's going to be about the artists, the gaming metaverse, the overall collaborations they put forward, the models: not everyone will think of Balenciaga just through the clothes.

Eva: There have been a lot of firsts. One that was really special was the children's collection [Spring/Summer 2018]. The obvious thing would have been to call children's agencies. But I said I have a lot of models who already have children, who used to be models at my agency or are still models at my agency, and we know a lot of models who have younger brothers and sisters. Using the kids of our models made such a difference. When you saw those men walking in the woods with their children on their arm and how they grabbed the clothes – that was one of the most touching moments of my whole career. If Demna thinks an idea is good, he will take it all the way, even if no one else has done it before. We will never go back; there will be still glamorous and classic models, but there is room for everything now. The obvious, beautiful, classic look is just not interesting enough. The world is too vast.

Demna: Ultimately, when I build a cast, I ask myself, 'What is beauty?' It's about questioning that. I've always been someone who looks for beauty in places where other people might not. I don't believe someone should tell me what beauty is. There is beauty in everything, and very often the models we choose are not seen as fitting the standard parameters. That's the link between myself and Cristóbal Balenciaga: he used to dress women who were absolutely not considered beautiful, and he loved it. They say that he loved a little belly on a woman or a hunched back. They were called the '*monstres de Balenciaga*' – so harsh! – but that was his challenge: to make them into Balenciaga icons. I have heard this about my cast, too, how I'm pushing the line between ugly and beautiful, but I never think about it that way. Back then, the world was elitist and exclusive and very narrow-minded. There was no Internet; people's opinions were formed in limited ways. In today's world, my mission as a creative is to challenge that kind of perception of what beauty is and what it's not – just as Cristóbal Balenciaga did.

'Cristóbal Balenciaga dressed women who were absolutely not considered beautiful, and he loved it. They were called the *monstres de Balenciaga*.'

1. Harmony Korine was 19 when he wrote the screenplay of *Kids*, which was filmed by legendary photographer Larry Clark in 1995. Korine's directorial feature, *Gummo*, released in 1997, has become a cult favourite, but was widely panned on its release. Janet Maslin in the *New York Times* wrote: 'October is early, but not too early to acknowledge Harmony Korine's *Gummo* as the worst film of the year.'

2. Conceptual artist Rosemarie Trockel is known for her sculpture, collage, ceramics, drawings, photographs, and particularly, knitting, in which she combines subtle social commentary and subversive aesthetics to critique women's place within a masculine art world and wider patriarchal structures.

3. École Duperré was established in 1864 as a school of applied arts to train women in sewing and art; today it offers courses in fashion, textile design. and graphic design.

4. A fixture of a reborn Paris club scene, Dora Diamant, who died in April 2020, was a DJ, multidisciplinary artist, model (including for Vetements), occasional choreographer, and actor, whose main ambition, according to *Interview* magazine in 2017, was to 'to defy categorization'.

5. Ralf Moeller is a German bodybuilder and action star. He won the amateur heavyweight division of the 1986 International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness Championships, held in Tokyo. The American TV commentator at the event described him as the 'nicest man in bodybuilding'. He made his screen debut opposite Jean-Claude Van Damme in *Cyborg* (1989).

Balenciaga archives

Autumn/Winter 2016 – Winter 2021

Photographs by David Sims
Fashion editor Joe McKenna

Minttu wears jacket, top and trousers, Autumn/Winter 2016, and gloves, Spring/Summer 2017.

Evaline wears coat, gloves and earrings,
Haute Couture 2020.

Willow wears coat and earrings,
Summer 2020.

Trade wears dress,
Autumn/Winter 2016.

Minttu wears a top, skirt, leggings,
shoes, earrings and ring, Summer 2020.

Tino wears zip-up top and trousers, Spring 2018.

Trade wears dress and earrings, Winter 2020.

Dax writes T-shirt, jacket,
trousers and shoes, Summer 2020.

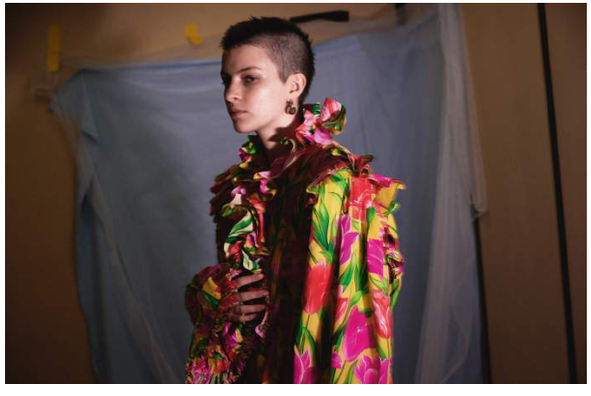
Evaline wears dress and shoes, Winter 2021,
and earrings, Summer 2018.

Willow wears dress and gloves, Winter 2018,
and shoes, Summer 2020.

Trade wears dress and tights, Autumn/Winter 2016,
and shoes, Summer 2020.

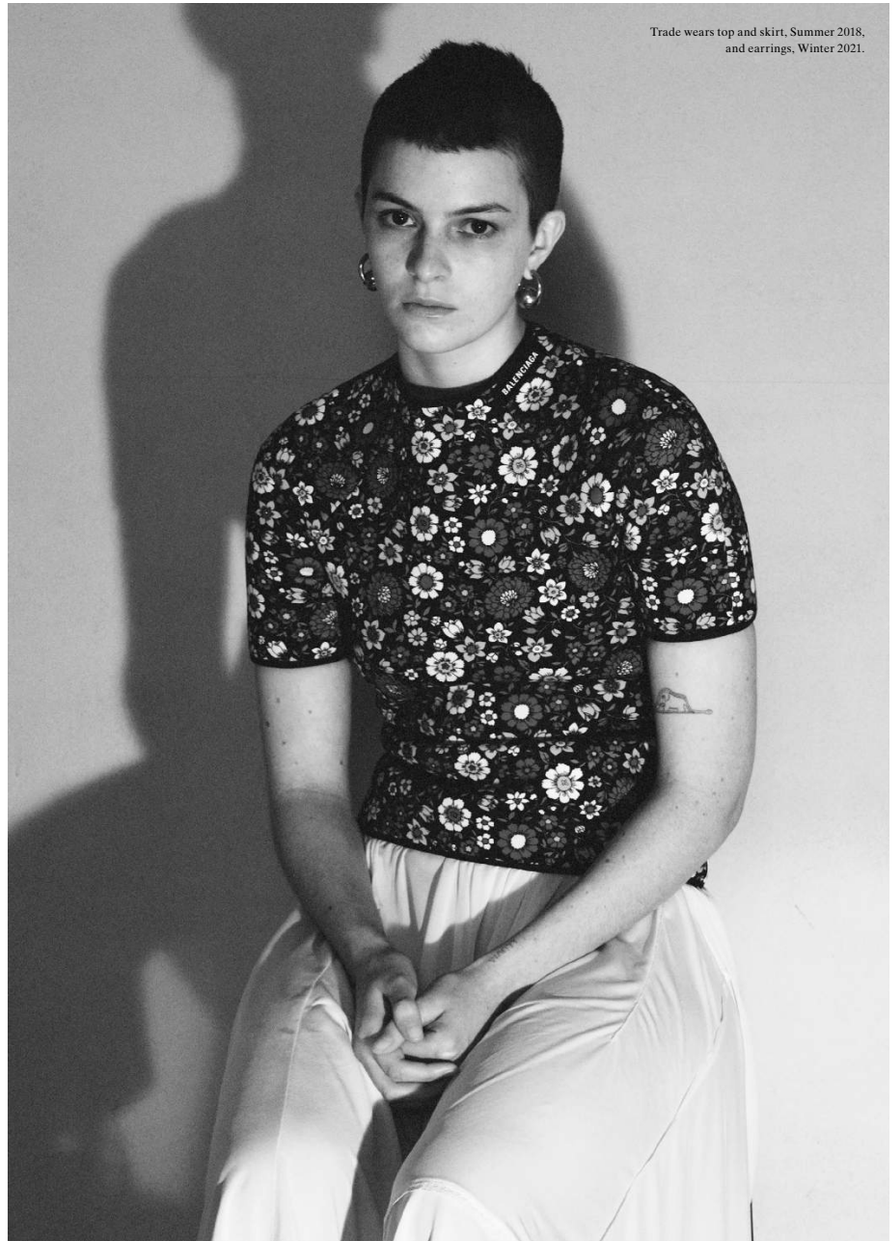
Minttu wears shirt, jacket and skirt,
Autumn/Winter 2016.

Trade wears dress
and earrings,
Winter 2021.

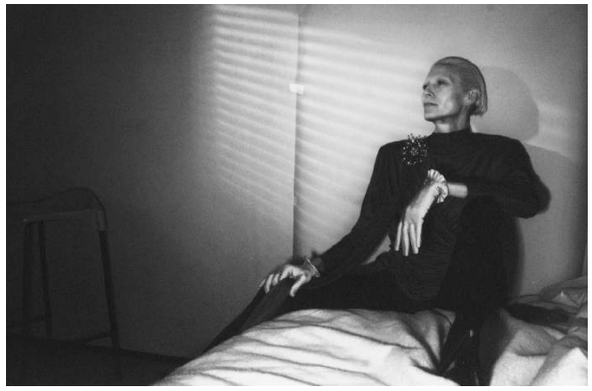


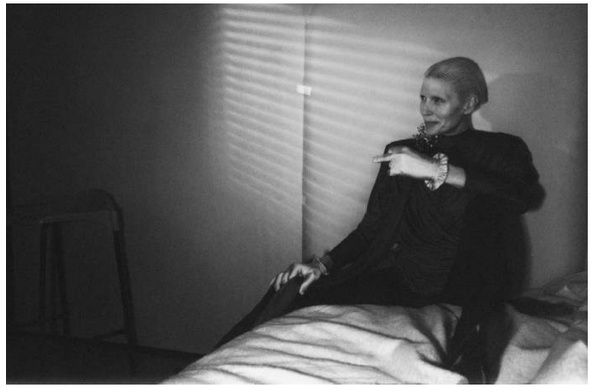
Willow wears dress and earrings, Winter 2020.

Minttu wears knit, jacket, trousers and shoes, Haute Couture 2020.



Trade wears top and skirt, Summer 2018, and earrings, Winter 2021.





Minttu wears top, leggings, shoes, gloves
and brooch, Spring/Summer 2017.

Peter wears blazer, shirt, shorts
and shoes, Spring/Summer 2017.

Trade wears dress and tights, Autumn/Winter 2016,
and shoes, Summer 2020.

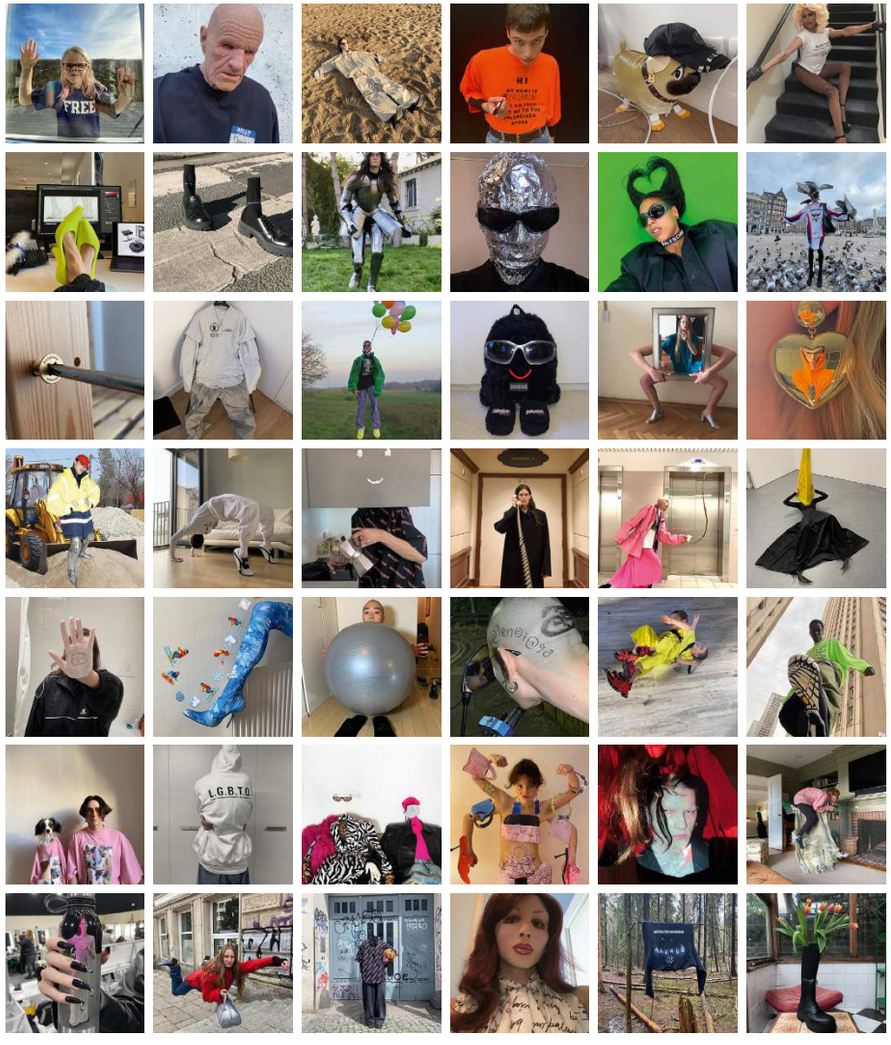
Trade wears skirt, Summer 2018.

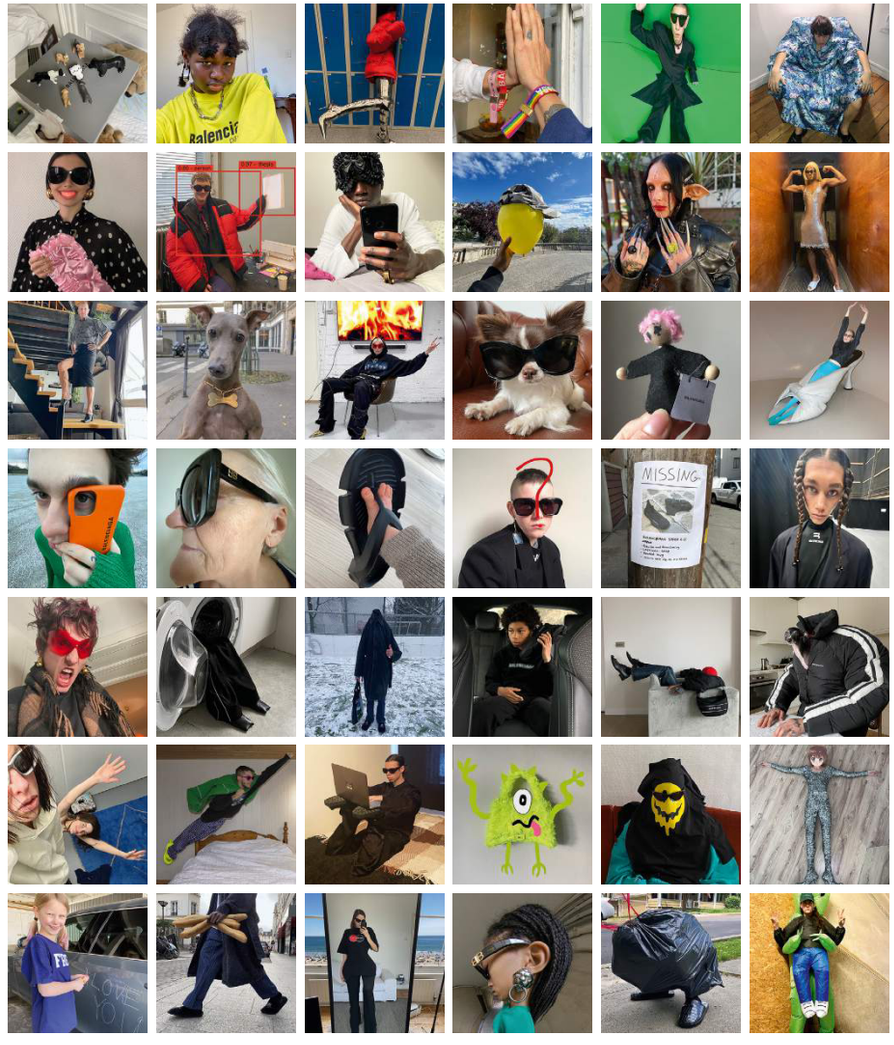
Models: Elvina at Milk Management, Minttu at Tomorrow is Another Day, Peter B. at Select Agency, Tino at Diverjmgmt, Trade at Theo Spencer, Willow at NG1 Model Management.
Hair: Duffy. Make-up: Lucia Pieroni. Set design: Poppy Bartlett. Casting: Rachel Chandler at Midland Agency. Production: Partner Films.

Peter wears trousers and shoes,
Spring/Summer 2017.

Camera roll

By Demna Gvasalia





Home or away?

Looking for a break in London, dreaming of a career in Nigeria. By Vanessa Ohaha. Photograph by Guillaume Blondiau.

Here's a confession for you: I am envious of people who don't have to emigrate to reach their full potential. I miss home and would like to be able to do what I love and succeed surrounded by the love of my family. The truth, however pessimistic it may sound, is that that isn't possible right now.

How did I end up here? Why am I here in my small room in a shared house 3,000 or so miles from home, in front of my laptop telling you what worries me when I'm alone? The simple answer is I am a fashion journalist chasing her dreams, which isn't uncomplicated.

Before I ended up here, I was in my home country, Nigeria. I had been out of school for about five years, had earned a degree in mass communications and understood that I wanted to work in fashion communication. I had such tunnel vision that given the local reality I sometimes wondered if I wasn't doing myself a disservice being so focused on fashion. I was trying to break into an industry that had only begun to find its footing in the previous decade. There was simply no real work in the vibrant and colourful, yet fractured and sporadic fashion media in Nigeria. Too many gatekeepers, too little money. It was almost like I had chosen the wrong path.

Years spent looking for internships and work to no avail, many short courses completed; a fashion and personal style blog started: so many ways to find an entry into the industry. This all began to take their toll on my mental health. When COVID-19 hit, much like the rest of the world, we were stuck in lockdown for a few months and for the most part alone with our thoughts. I began to wonder what my life was: I was 23, had no career (at least none worth mentioning), and was tired of waiting for life to start. So, when the opportunity presented itself for me to start an MA in Fashion Communication at Central Saint Martins, I grabbed it, while being fully aware that going back to school would not be a path to guaranteed success. It was a chance worth taking and so, nine months ago, I hopped on a plane. Which brings us back here, to my tiny room in London.

I'm now a few weeks away from finishing that MA and am beginning to explore career options. Being an international student, I have been asked many times if I will be returning home to pursue a career in fashion. I don't blame the well-meaning people who ask this; it is easy and maybe right to assume that I would want to take the knowledge I have gained back home to enrich the industry, especially as African fashion is experiencing a kind of renaissance. There is so much attention on designers from the continent right now, with Nigerian fashion leading the way. Knowledge can only go so far though and there is much to be said for the practical benefit of any experience that I might gain from working in an established industry.

There are amazing voices back home, like *NATIVE* magazine, which uses music and culture to highlight African fashion, while creating a constant dialogue between the underground and the mainstream. As a lover of thrift and circular fashion, I am inspired by the magazine *Display Copy*, which curates edits of vintage and second-hand clothing, seeking to inspire readers to reimagine their approach to fashion, without losing creativity, connectivity, and individual expression. I am also excited by the voices of the young people at *GUAP*, who are constantly discovering, showcasing and nurturing emerging creative talent.

While I know what an honour it would be to join the new revolution in Nigerian fashion, I still wonder if I'm ready to spend the next decade or two of my life championing the growth of a local industry that I love so much, while earning very little. Yet I am equally aware that navigating the fashion industry in London as a black woman, more so an immigrant black woman, will not always be easy for me. I sometimes feel out of place, like I'm on the outside looking in or like my voice does not matter in certain spaces.

You'll forgive me, I hope, for using this space to ask questions to which I don't yet have answers. Am I ready to be a pioneer of sorts for the cause and work to build the structures that Nigerian fashion media needs? Would it not be presumptuous of me to assume that I can fix anything at all? Am I selfish for wanting to focus on my career, even starting from the ground up in a country far from home? Is there a way for me to promote stories of Nigerian fashion even if I am no longer in the thick of it, perhaps by acting as a conduit? Here comes that tunnel vision again: whatever happens, in the words of so many young Nigerians, even when the road isn't the smoothest, we move!

Rag-trade Medicis

When's the right time for art to take cash from fashion?
By Ben Broome. Photograph by Guillaume Blondiau.

Following a well-received cold email, I recently met with a Turner Prize-winning artist whom I greatly respect for too many white-wine spritzers at a London pub. I had initially written to him with a request: 'I've got peers around me who keep me inspired every day, but I'd love some sage advice from someone who's been in the game for a while.' I was genuinely hoping for 'sage advice', but my therapist might have suggested that 'validation' was another thing on my agenda.

As I watched this artistic genius knock back a fourth spritzer, he told me something I had begun to suspect but had hoped I wouldn't have to reckon with: 'These fashion brands are the new patrons of the art world. They're the modern-day Medici family and if I was your age I'd make sure I was aboard the money train instead of waving from the station.' He was right.

I'm a curator – something I've only recently become comfortable admitting – from County Durham. I moved to London in 2015 to find my fortune and six years later I'm still searching. I've achieved a small degree of success in recent years with *Drawing a Blank*, a series of community-driven group exhibitions that take place once a year internationally. With no trust fund and a dad who isn't David Zwirner, it has been a bumpy ride keeping the show on the road, but I've just about managed it by selling pieces of my soul to the highest bidder.

Major fashion labels have single-handedly paid my rent over the past few years and supported – with varying degrees of self-interest – my exhibitions and passion projects. Ultimately, I'm working towards a point where the bill for my curatorial endeavours is footed by the Tate or the ICA, but in the meantime, I have to rely on these rag-trade Medicis to make possible my ambitions.

That being said, I don't always say yes: as a curator I have a responsibility to protect the artists I work with. I've been careful to read the small print and not become blinded by pound signs. Just last month I turned down a near six-figure sum to curate an exhibition on behalf of a well-known luxury label. They insisted on approving the artworks to ensure that nothing politicized or controversial was on display. Fuck that.

At the other end of the spectrum, an eternally cool New York skateboard brand donated $15,000 for a recent project, no strings attached – without a contract, logo on the wall, or Instagram tag – simply because they saw the value in what we were doing and wanted to support. People talk, so of course word got around that some of the brand's cash had been added to the pot, but public perception is exactly that: the brand was seen to be contributing to this cultural cauldron, rather than pulling out handfuls of artistic integrity for the sole benefit of its 'brand image'.

When the success of a brand sponsorship is measured in 'engagements per follow', 'impression numbers' and 'referral traffic', I can't imagine it is easy explaining to the chief marketing officer why the statistically unquantifiable 'word of mouth' carries infinitely more influence. Supporting a budding creative mind in the realization of a project they care deeply about is an act which, if done with honesty and integrity, can buy a lifetime of loyalty and blossom into a sustained collaboration. Forward-thinking brands are coming to realize this. Over the next decade I'd like to think we'll see a shift away from the current cultural piggybacking towards a more philanthropic model of artistic support.

To any creative director or head of brand marketing reading this, I would ask:

- Does a philanthropic approach have more power than the heavy handedness of a 'branded' approach?
- Do the compromises you're demanding affect the ethos, integrity or concept of the original artwork?
- What are you doing to ensure that the artist feels respected?
- Would you prefer a short-lived logo above the door or a lifetime of loyalty from the artist you're working with?

I am fortunate to have met a few individuals in the world of fashion who hold the metaphorical keys to the safe, without having drunk the Kool-Aid. To those people who have been fighting my corner, I'm deeply grateful. To all other patrons, gallerists, sugar daddies and fashion brands: do feel free to get in touch.

From war zone to wardrobe

How a young boy's love of army surplus birthed a brand.
By Yesawi. Photograph by Guillaume Blondiau.

When I was a young boy in Baghdad, playing with my toy soldiers was always a way for me to feel safe in my own little world, and I would do it often. Then everything changed: I went from tucking away my troops for the night to being awoken by painfully loud air-raid sirens. Next thing I knew I was with my entire family rushing to the basement to seek refuge. After a sleepless night of heavy bombardment, we gathered a few necessities, said goodbye to our home and headed out into the unknown. Who knew creating my own fictional war zone would turn into a reality? Part of me feared I had brought it to life.

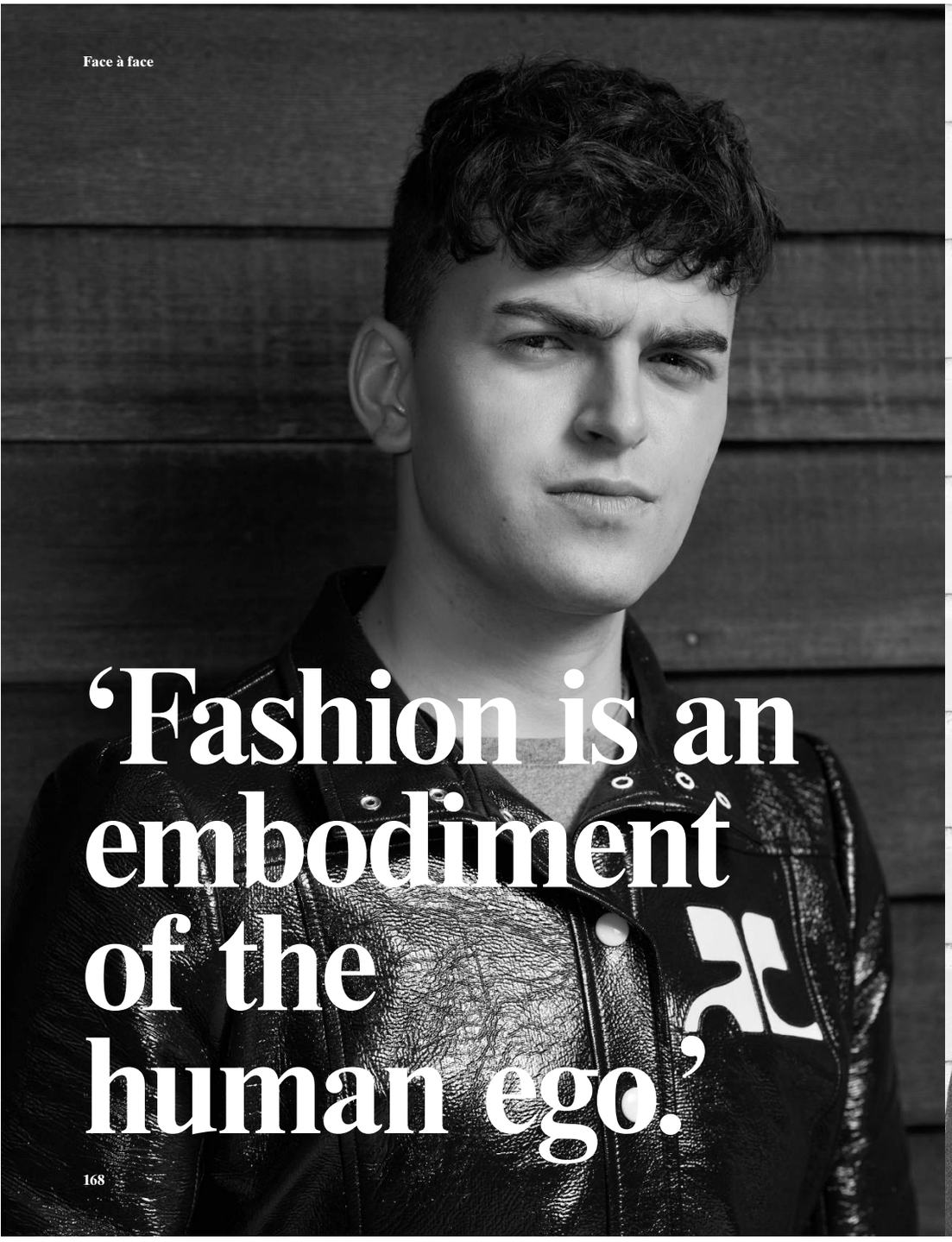
From then on my childhood felt like a constant stream of newness: new places, new homes, new people. Continuously on the move, I was always having to adapt to change. The only thing that remained constant was my family, my self and my ability to create my own world. Lately, I've been thinking about the impact this all had on my identity and how exactly I grew into who I am today. I realize that style had a lot to do with it and it is a part of myself that I cherish. Even at a young age, I knew that no matter what hardships I had been through, my identity would always be my true freedom – and the way I dressed had a lot to do with it.

Style was something of a saviour. I don't remember paying much attention to the clothes I wore until suddenly it was something we had to think about. From hand-me-downs and charity donations to thrift shopping in Beirut's Sunday Market (a rare treat I wish I could relive now), I never had a say in what I wore. Then, when I was eight years old, my mum bought me my first pair of camouflage trousers. It was a light-bulb moment for me. I became obsessed with those trousers and refused to wear anything else. I would mix them with shirts and jumpers, and wear them whether at home or on outings with my family. It felt like all of a sudden I had been given control. The keys. A canvas. Around this time I became a Boy Scout and it felt like as if I had made it back to lying on the floor playing with my toy soldiers. Somehow having moved away from the chaos, I could focus on what I could control and sink into the organization of scouts: the uniform, the code of conduct, the reliability. The Scouts, like styling my own outfits, felt like the opposite of chaos. It felt like agency, like freedom.

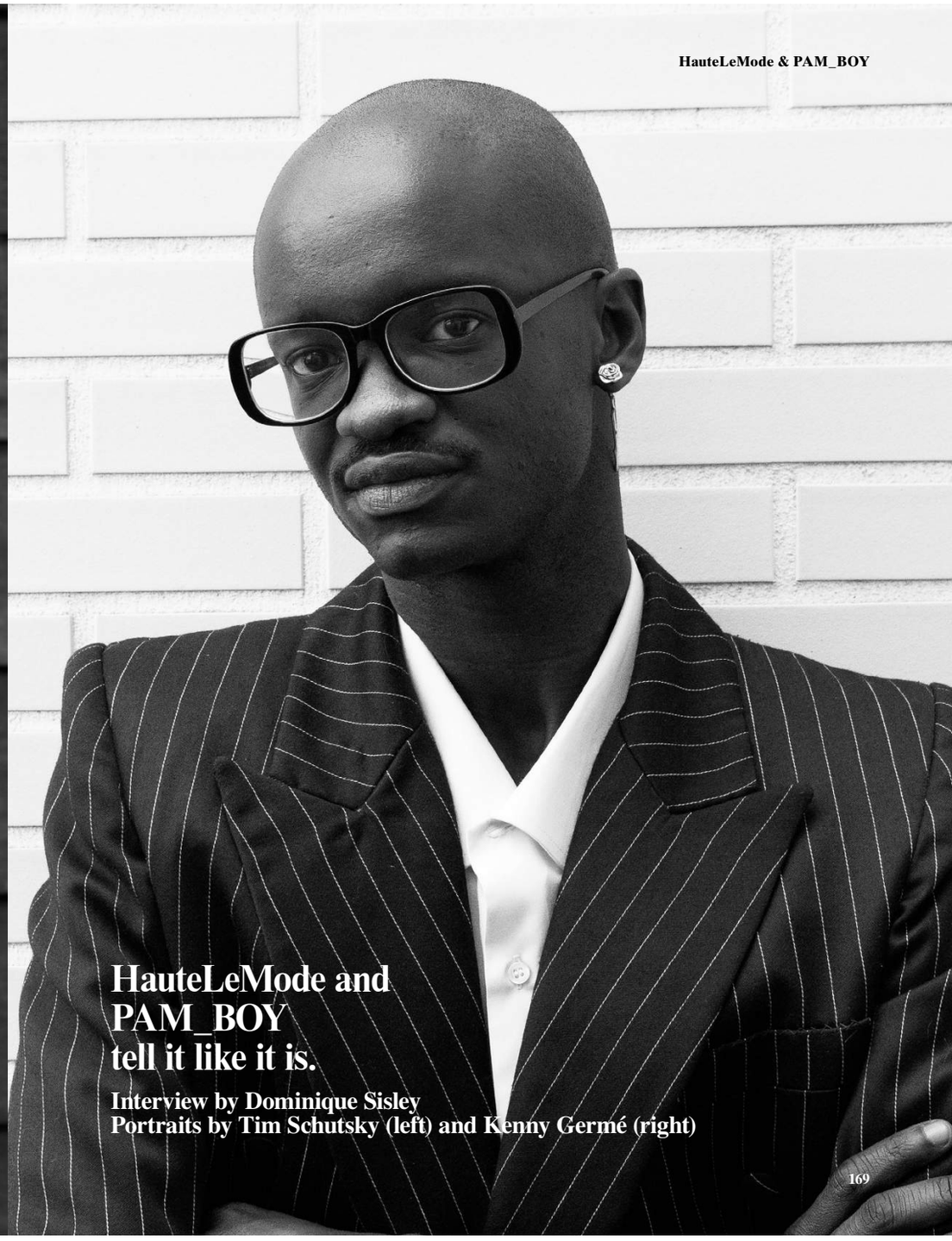
As I grew into my teens, my love for collecting army figurines morphed into a love of collecting army surplus. I would combine pieces like football shirts, band T-shirts or my school blazer with military wear – it became my signature style. I now have an archive of military wear collected over almost two decades. Mixing the simplicity, durability and functionality of military wear with other clothing still brings me a great sense of comfort. It just rings true. It is how I keep my history and myself close, and it is amazing to me that I unknowingly built this framework at such a young age.

In my early 20s, I visited Japan for the first time and was captivated by a new wave of creativity. Learning about Japanese craftsmanship helped me appreciate a different type of order. I could recognize similar military shapes and patterns, and started to see how they could be more refined, less like a uniform or costume. The kaleidoscope of individuality on the streets of Tokyo made me feel at home in a way I had never experienced. All these people creating and recreating themselves through style. Something about seeing this on such a large scale cemented my desire to be a part of this process for others. I figured that maybe I could design clothing that might resonate.

Starting my label C.O.R. was a natural progression – an extension of myself and yet another chance to create a world of my own that others might relate to. A world without rules and a community in which everyone involved could feel safe and welcome. My creative process mostly entails doing what I have been doing since I was eight. Breaking down what I see around me, processing, filtering, recreating. I look at every experience as an opportunity to create or translate something. Decades later, it is still not simple to make sense of the world, but I've realized that collective change always starts with the individual. For me, style is so interconnected with the self that it will always be the focal point of my mission to leave a lasting imprint on people's hearts – just as it has on mine.



‘Fashion is an embodiment of the human ego.’



HauteLeMode and PAM_BOY tell it like it is.

Interview by Dominique Sisley
Portraits by Tim Schutsky (left) and Kenny Germé (right)

Despite their increasing success, Luke Meagher and Pierre A. M'Pelé will always feel like fashion outsiders. Since they emerged on the industry's fringes in the late 2010s, the pair have built formidable careers as critics: Meagher through his savagely honest YouTube channel, HauteLeMode, and M'Pelé through his irresistibly puckish Instagram account @PAM_BOY. Both were started as a way to break into the then-impenetrable fortress of luxury fashion: a land they saw as full of dusty legacy publications, high school-style hierarchies, and sycophantic ego pandering.

For Meagher, this meant creating a space online where he could be 'fun, sassy, bi**hy, analytical' (a description that is now HauteLeMode's motto). The 24-year-old New Yorker founded the channel in 2015 while still in high school, after stumbling into the rabbit hole of fashion history and falling in love. He started making short vlogs to share his newly acquired knowledge, before pivoting fearlessly into criticism. The channel has since racked up nearly 93 million views and now has more than 639,000 subscribers (as well as accompanying Instagram, Twitter and TikTok accounts). And over the years, Meagher hasn't been afraid to deploy his often eye-watering 'tell-it-like-it-is' approach to fashion criticism, waging war with everyone from Clare Waight Keller's Givenchy to Maria Grazia Chiuri's Dior to Hedi Slimane's Celine.

M'Pelé is more measured, though just as mischievous. The 28-year-old's pathway into fashion has been more conventional, with his @PAM_BOY Instagram serving as a springboard for editor roles at *i-D*, *Perfect* and *LOVE*. Like Meagher, he prides himself on both his honesty and his deep love for fashion: his social media is an enlivening mix of memes, razor-sharp commentary and playful, incisive reviews (perhaps most famous are his emoji runway recaps). It's a talent that hasn't gone unnoticed by the establishment: on the day of this interview, it was announced he would become *GQ* France's head of editorial content. 'I want to carry on being spontaneous and free,' he says, after being congratulated on the role by an effusive Meagher. 'I want to allow myself to be surprised by this industry still.'

Let's talk about your beginnings. Luke, you started HauteLeMode as a YouTube channel in 2015, right?

Luke Meagher: Yes, at the time, there was a rise in YouTubers who were incredibly popular, and I could see that people were really invested in the people on the screen. It's almost like characters on TV; people get attached to you, even if they might not know who you are. That is why I thought YouTube was the place to start for me, and it worked out perfectly because it did everything I expected it to. I had really begun making fashion-conscious content in the way that I am now by early 2016.

Pierre, you launched yourself through the @PAM_BOY Instagram.

Pierre A. M'Pelé: I used to use Instagram like everyone else, posting my holiday pictures and fun imagery; it wasn't so much about fashion. Then when I graduated in 2017, I was freelancing here and there, but I needed to get my content and words out there. I thought Instagram was the best platform, because if you can capture people's attention with a good image then they will ultimately read the caption. And the longer the caption was, the more positive the feedback, so I thought maybe that was something people were ready to see on Instagram. I had thought it was just about images, but in fact, people were hungry for words.

What can you remember about the fashion industry at that time? What was wrong with it? What did you feel you needed to change?

Pierre: I was personally hungry for criticism. Like Luke, I grew up with Style.com, Tim Blanks, Cathy Horyn and all these people who have helped shape how we understand fashion. But then when I started developing my own voice, I felt that there wasn't a new generation of people of that calibre. I'm not comparing myself to those legends of fashion journalism, but I felt that there was an opportunity to speak to people our age, and people who didn't want to just listen to the establishment. There was a bit of a rebellious feel to it. It was more about being super honest. I felt like I had the freedom to be as free as possible and that is what I wanted to see. I was writing content that *I* wanted to read.

Luke: HauteLeMode was about understanding and contextualizing fashion for the everyday person. I do really love in-depth, academic analysis of fashion, but I think the everyday person won't always get the context and references. So for me, HauteLeMode is a way to make fashion fun and approachable.

You're both known for having strong, sometimes controversial opinions. Do you still feel comfortable expressing yourself in that way?

Pierre: I do feel comfortable, but I also feel – and especially with my new job – that I have transitioned from writing and criticism to more of a broader editorial vision, and that has always been my goal. I never really wanted to be just a critic or just a writer or just a journalist. I can still be very opinionated, but even when I've shared a negative or constructive review of a designer or creative director, I still end up having a great relationship with them. I have called Olivier Rousteing tacky before, but he and I are still really good friends. It's never been my goal to destroy; it was to keep the conversation going. I'm not trying to cancel anyone or create some kind of mob to destroy whatever they are trying to build, and designers always understood that. I have also matured: when you are 22 or 24, you feel a lot less inclined to compromise and you feel a lot more empowered by the responses that you get from people. That is how it works in social media; we all know that – it is all about creating antagonism – but I can still be a bitch when it's needed!

Luke, you don't have a problem with being a bitch.

Luke: No, it's my calling card. I think that is part and parcel of the whole idea of making things accessible for the everyday person. Fashion people use a lot of highfalutin words, but I don't think they are actually describing any of the things that they are talking about. I'm far more down in the gutter, like, 'This looks like shit!' What I say might not be politically correct, but it is also what the everyday person gravitates towards. You are not punching down but punching up. I think a lot of fashion is punching down: whether that's taking from homeless people in the 1980s, like Rei Kawakubo, or from poor Soviet children in the 1990s. So when you are able to jab a bit at the top, I think it helps everyone to be part of the joke. I do also think the harshness hurts certain people, as Pierre says. I have been banned from a show or two when the PRs are upset. But then that is also part of the game. If the collection is not good, I'm not saying that to be mean to you; I'm saying that because you are not upholding the legacy of the brand, and because I don't think you are spending enough time doing the thing you are supposed to be doing, while there is probably a shit ton of other designers around who are not getting paid nearly as much. I think we have to hold everybody to task. But then it's hard to go to Europe and be schmoozed by a brand. If it offers to pay for your hotel or your flight, then that is sort of an ethical dilemma. What I am trying to grapple with now is being able to say what I want, while also getting the access that I need.

Pierre: Luke, do you feel that you are part of the establishment? Because to me you are, if not in a traditional sense. You are the establishment when it comes to fashion and YouTube, and you do have power. Do you think about your own influence?

Luke: I wouldn't say that I am part of the establishment, because I am still sending emails saying, 'Hi, can I come to the show?' It's not really about how many followers or likes you have, or what your engagement is, because people don't really consider social-media platforms as desirable. I think maybe in a digital sense, you could think of me as the establishment, but I constantly run up against so many barriers within the fashion industry that I don't think of myself that way.

How do you feel about the way the fashion world is adapting to this new digital era? Are there any brands that are doing good things, or any that you think are flailing?

Pierre: Gucci is one that has always been consistently good in terms of digital. They have managed to understand more than many other brands, who their audiences are, where they are and how to target them in terms of marketing. From the Gucci Fest to all the people they associate themselves with on social media, they are probably at the top in terms of understanding how we are shifting to an all-digital industry.

Luke: I agree, Gucci is great. Also Balenciaga, who have started to really push the digital strategy in a way that is intriguing and weird.

Pierre: It's refreshing to see a brand like Balenciaga that is synonymous with high luxury – a brand that everyone respects – being completely disruptive. Demna is a disruptor. It is just very, very smart.

Is fashion still powered by traditional power politics? How can that change?

'I love Luke's power and independence because YouTube allows him, to a certain extent, to be more than someone who just works for a magazine.'

'I felt there was an opportunity to speak to people our age, who didn't want to just listen to the establishment. There was a rebellious feel to it.'

Luke: Yes. I've understood that during fashion weeks. Not to be an arsehole, but YouTubers, Instagrammers and photographers come from a digital perspective, so we compare our numbers, and when you see certain publications with seven or eight people sitting on the front row, and all together they only have a small part of your engagement, it's like, 'OK, how does that work?' It is not what you do and how you do it, it is still very much who you know – and that I really did not realize until very recently. It doesn't matter who you are and how many followers you have, you still have to play the game.

Pierre: It's also because the people in top positions haven't really moved. It's the same people who have been editors-in-chief for many, many years. The power structure is still very much the same young voices. Now it seems that people are hanging onto power because power is sweet and delicious. Until we change the mindset and allow ourselves to move on from certain practices then new voices won't be able to flourish. It is really a matter of people realizing that you don't have to hold onto power – you don't have to stay in your position for 30 years.

Luke: There comes a complacency with power, as Pierre is saying, and that leads to the issues we are seeing more of now. Everyone knows that people go to a show or an event, see a collection, but what they say in their reviews is not what they are going to say to their friends at dinner later that day. People are not content with the industry because there is a lack of skill, and people aren't being pushed to elevate their as glamorous, and fashion was not as popular. Today, especially with fame being such a valuable commodity, it has changed the way that we understand our industry.

Are you saying that one reason fashion feels so stagnant now is because of our collective hunger for fame and because our values are all in the wrong place?

Pierre: How many conversations have I had with people on Instagram about how they want to be in fashion, or be an editor or a designer, when really all they want to do is hang out with Bella Hadid?

Luke: That's great, but that is not the reason why you should be getting into the gig.

Pierre: Fashion has become so popular that people just think it is attainable

'Fashion people use highfalutin words. I'm more like, 'This looks shit!' That isn't politically correct, but it's what everyday people gravitate towards.'

and as long as you don't have the tools in your hand, it doesn't matter how many followers and how much engagement you have. To get those tools, there needs to be a generational shift, and people need to retire. I know it sounds harsh, but it is the truth: people need to make more room and space for younger voices to flourish in the industry. Because then these people will have the tools in their hands to act and to drive change.

Do you think the media is to blame for this stagnancy, too?

Pierre: Definitely, both the designer side and the media. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was space for new voices. Balenciaga retired in 1968, but he wasn't kicked out. He was still Cristóbal Balenciaga, and he was still great, but he felt the need for young people and work. At a certain point, you reach a place where you get complacent, and you don't feel you have to continue pushing. To bring up Balenciaga again, the man was still developing in 1967, 1968, creating new takes and checking every single order before it left the atelier. There is no longer that desire to push more, to learn more, to elevate. I'm thinking of Alexander McQueen; his inherent understanding of tailoring allowed him to develop new silhouettes. It's the same thing with Balenciaga and Vionnet: they were designers who really cared about what they did and weren't necessarily obsessed with fame and fortune. We don't really have people who care about the craft as much as they used to.

Pierre: Fashion was not as glamorous then; being a fashion designer was not and easy. I'm not saying it shouldn't be democratic or accessible, but we should reward people who are in it because they want to drive change, not because they want to elevate themselves. I mean, we all want to elevate ourselves, we are all striving for more and to be able to do good things, but there are different breeds of people interested in fashion. I am very doubtful when it comes to certain people's intentions as to why they want to be part of this industry. We have glamorized it so much; people think fashion is about the Met Gala, but it isn't – the Met Gala is just a big party. When I fell in love with fashion, I never thought of the Met Gala. When I was a teenager I didn't know the Met Gala even existed. I was just interested in the clothes and the collections and what the designers had to say. Luke was saying

how what people write and what they say behind closed doors is different, and it's true, and that is where that wider conversation about money and power comes along. When you start to be more part of the industry, you understand all these connections. There are things I want to say, but I have to suppress my own voice – not all the time, and it doesn't happen a lot, but it does happen. That is why I love Luke's power and independence because YouTube allows you, to a certain extent, to be more than someone who works for a magazine or for a young designer who wants to get that job in a big house.

Luke: There are a lot of issues with the truth in our industry. We are devoid of people saying how they really feel, so when they do say something that is not wholly positive, there is an automatic draining than people let on.

Pierre: The one thing I say to myself is, 'The planet is burning, get over yourself!' Whenever I feel that, or whenever I see someone who is behaving in a way that I think is inappropriate, I remember that no one is curing cancer here. Somehow we still think we are.

What are your feelings about fashion weeks more generally? It seems to be an abusive and horrible experience for everyone involved.

Pierre: I do not enjoy fashion weeks; I have never enjoyed fashion weeks. It's the moment of the year that my family knows not to message me because I will be irritated, and I will probably cry on the phone. I never get enough sleep. If you're, say, Anna Wintour, then I am sure it's a great experience, but when

Luke: It is very intense. Everyone is jostling for the same shit, so they want what they want out of you, but then when you are inconvenient… I get that sitting front row is a status symbol, but I would like to sit front row because I would like to see the clothes. Otherwise just let me do a press preview or come to the re-see the day after. If I get third row and I can't see shit then there is no point in even going. It's the mentality that there are all these other people who are more important than you, and we internalize that, but if I can't see the fucking clothes then, no offence, but why am I here? The whole thing is a very high-school mentality. We are all just horrible human egos constantly second-guessing ourselves. Maybe other people don't, but I think you have to be incredibly mentally strong to do the fashion

'Everyone knows that people go to a show, see a collection, and then what they write in their review isn't what they say to their friends later at dinner.'

'no' switch because it's a really jarring thing for people to hear. It doesn't register for them, so you are automatically cut off. Once they realize that they can't control you as much, they offer you less. This is also just human nature: fashion is an embodiment of the human ego because we all think we are all more important than we actually are and that we deserve more than we probably do, me included. Going to fashion weeks is like being in high school again; it is a hierarchy thing. You are playing mind games with yourself all the time, thinking that you're not important and that people are going to look down on you. It's a whole mindfuck. I cried at least three times this last season and there have been high-profile editors and stylists who have said they cried a lot, too. It is far more mentally and emotionally you are mid-level or when you are just starting, it's not. It is very difficult to get access, and it's a very stressful environment because you feel so exposed. You have to meet people who don't necessarily have your back and are there constantly. It's a sprint and a marathon at the same time: the season lasts for a month and feels never ending. Brands put a lot of money into those big shows and events, so if you don't go then you are impeding on your own career, and that creates a tremendous amount of stress. You also hear a lot of disgusting things about how people behave in our industry – and I'm not someone who would judge because we are all human beings, and no one is perfect – but I feel like fashion weeks create this bubble where everything is intensified. How do you feel about it, Luke?

weeks and feel super great about yourself the whole time.

Pierre: Change is definitely on the way. Younger people and younger generations – not me, I am so insecure, but people like you, Luke – will go to a fashion show now in Adidas shorts and a hoodie. I am still like, 'Oh my God, how can you do that?' Because the way I dress is my protection; it's my armour. I want to look good because we know how superficial fashion people are. But I wish I had Luke's confidence to just go there and not give a fuck about anything, and just focus on the clothes. That's very brave, I think.

What about politics? We're in an era now where a lot of brands are co-opting radical political movements and language – like Maria Grazia Chiuri's

'feminist' Dior runway last year – so what do you think about the role politics plays in fashion? What social responsibility should brands have?
Pierre: I think if it's something that's completely inherent to a designer or a brand's point of view, then they should be political. Fashion has always been political, from women deciding to wear miniskirts to the punk revolution. It has always been linked in one way or another to politics, and today, especially post-George Floyd, I feel like there has been a shift in people understanding the trade's systemic racism, and how we've portrayed black male and female bodies in fashion. In some instances, it has been pretty racist. I also think brands should be political even when it's not serving their interests – if you are political just because you'll be able to sell more bags or perfume or shoes then I don't really believe in your message. I have been working with brands on certain questions concerning systemic racism, and it's all internal; they don't communicate [publicly] about it. Then you have brands that know being political is very trendy and you just need a social-media post to just show people that you are fighting the battle when really you are not.
Luke: If you are going to do it, then fucking do it and shut up. I don't think that incessantly talking about it is going to help you. Just fucking give the money, do the collaborations, make sure your teams internally are actually diverse and not just all white people. An Instagram post is not political.

Are there any brands that you would be comfortable saying have disappointed you, particularly post-George Floyd?
Pierre: Brands have been making an effort, but it is super slow. It's an industry that's quick to make the next billion, but really slow to drive social change. I will forever be disappointed with Dolce & Gabbana – pre-, post- and during George Floyd – but I'm not necessarily disappointed in any others. It is sad that it took such a tragic event to create the impulse for such a change: we shouldn't wait for a tragedy to get the ball rolling on those issues. Maybe I am a bit disappointed with every single brand that didn't do that in the past, but post-George Floyd there has been a real willingness to advocate change.
Luke: I can't say that I see any change. For the most part we have gone back to business as usual. I've noticed more people interacting with fashion like Tel-far or Hood by Air, and shopping from smaller Black-owned businesses, but that is more from the everyday person rather than these gigantic conglomerates that could do so much.

What are your thoughts on call-out culture and Instagram accounts like Diet Prada?
Luke: I have no personal issues with them whatsoever, but I unfollowed Diet Prada years ago. It's not for me. That said, I don't think people give Diet Prada enough credit: it has scared a lot of brands into not stealing young designers' work. But I don't see Diet Prada unless someone sends me a post. I don't think about them that much.
Pierre: They have created a very negative environment in fashion. In the beginning it was fine, but now the bulk of what they do is witch-hunts, and it's not so constructive or necessary. Also, everyone has to pay their bills, but they got into bed with brands and started taking money from them. You cannot be a watchdog and then be sitting in the Prada front row. It has to be either or… I always say, look at the comments section; it's a very toxic, the environment they have created. When you see people asking for people's deaths, it is just really gross. I think they have encouraged it because their following is growing and that is all that actually matters to them. They are just here for themselves. It grows off negativity and toxicity. But I can also see that when it comes to certain issues, they have done an amazing job. I am not completely anti-Diet Prada. They have amplified conversations that need to be amplified, around #MeToo and so on. But when they started encouraging a mob culture and getting all nasty and personal, then I blocked them. Fashion can be toxic by itself; you don't need to add more voices to create a negative environment. It's just not needed. It has happened to me a few times, where people start being rude to each other in my comments section, and I just delete and block them. This is not the space for people to insult each other – where is the civility in that? It can become dangerous and can affect people's mental health. You can be critical and harsh and super honest without crossing boundaries. I think they have allowed people to do that though. From the moment I noticed that I was done with it. That is not the kind of industry that I would like to be a part of.

'I am not completely anti-Diet Prada. But when they started encouraging a mob culture and getting all nasty and personal, then I blocked them.'

What about your predictions for the future of the industry, particularly when it comes to sustainability? Do you feel optimistic about it?
Luke: I genuinely think it is just going to be the same. I have participated with it – I went to LA for the Gucci show, going from London and Paris and Milan, using cars and flights and Ubers, and I am just one person – but I don't think it will change in the way that we think. At least with the gigantic brands, it just doesn't make sense: creating a bag is wasteful, but then you put it in a box, with tissue paper and with a ribbon, and in another bag. I know this sounds terrible, but I think you are going to need natural disasters to really scare the shit out of people into giving up this stuff. I Google 'climate change' once a week, and I have an existential crisis every time. It is great to see mycelium leather from Hermès, but you still have crocodile farms. And the issues are so complex: people don't like exotic skins and crocodile farming, but they are also creating jobs with which people are supporting their families. Each and every tiny little decision has so many repercussions.
Pierre: Could they at least just shut off the lights in their flagships at night? I think it's important to be optimistic, otherwise I would go and have a goat farm and live a great sustainable life outside of fashion. But I think it will take time, because getting a big brand to change a production line is not something you can do overnight. Are they making these changes as quickly as they can? Probably not. But do their efforts keep me optimistic? Yes, because I want to believe that people want change. I have a lot more confidence in younger brands that don't want to be part of this system and whose priorities are not to sell millions or make billions. There are people who just want to make a comfortable living and keep on being creative: they don't want to burn out or have a mega-yacht or private jet, they just want to keep on being creative. There are many young designers who truly inspire me in that sense. Do we actually need to make more money? Is it always about making more money? They are getting ready to establish the new ways and practices of the future. If you want things to be done a certain way, you can put your foot down, and you will be surprised to see how many times people will go your way.

The pandemic seems to have changed how many people approach and prioritize work. Does that make you feel more optimistic about the industry's future?
Pierre: For sure. I think I have learned how to slow down, and I think we all need to slow down even more and reshuffle our priorities. There is no need to be constantly sprinting. We all need to be kinder to ourselves. All these fashion things, as important as they are culturally, on a personal level, they're not that deep. And that's coming from someone who loves fashion so much.
Luke: I personally think it has almost made us unhealthier, in a work sense. The fashion-week schedule was crammed, but now there are shows all the time. There is not a person who can take time to write, work, or discuss these collections because there are so many. I don't think the human brain can logically churn out so many opinions. You used to have a two-month break between fashion months, but now it is once a week or every two weeks. That doesn't allow you to focus on other things. For me, the red carpets and all of that, are so much to handle that I don't fucking care any more. It is impossible for the human brain to keep up with everything going on.
Pierre: You need to put boundaries and be kind to yourself. I used to run everywhere all the time – the fear of missing out! The FOMO! And now after the pandemic, I'm like, 'Please, just leave me alone!'

Luke, that sounds just like what's happened to you.
Luke: Yeah – I'm like, 'Thank you, but no thank you.'

‘Fierce, empowering, never vulgar.’

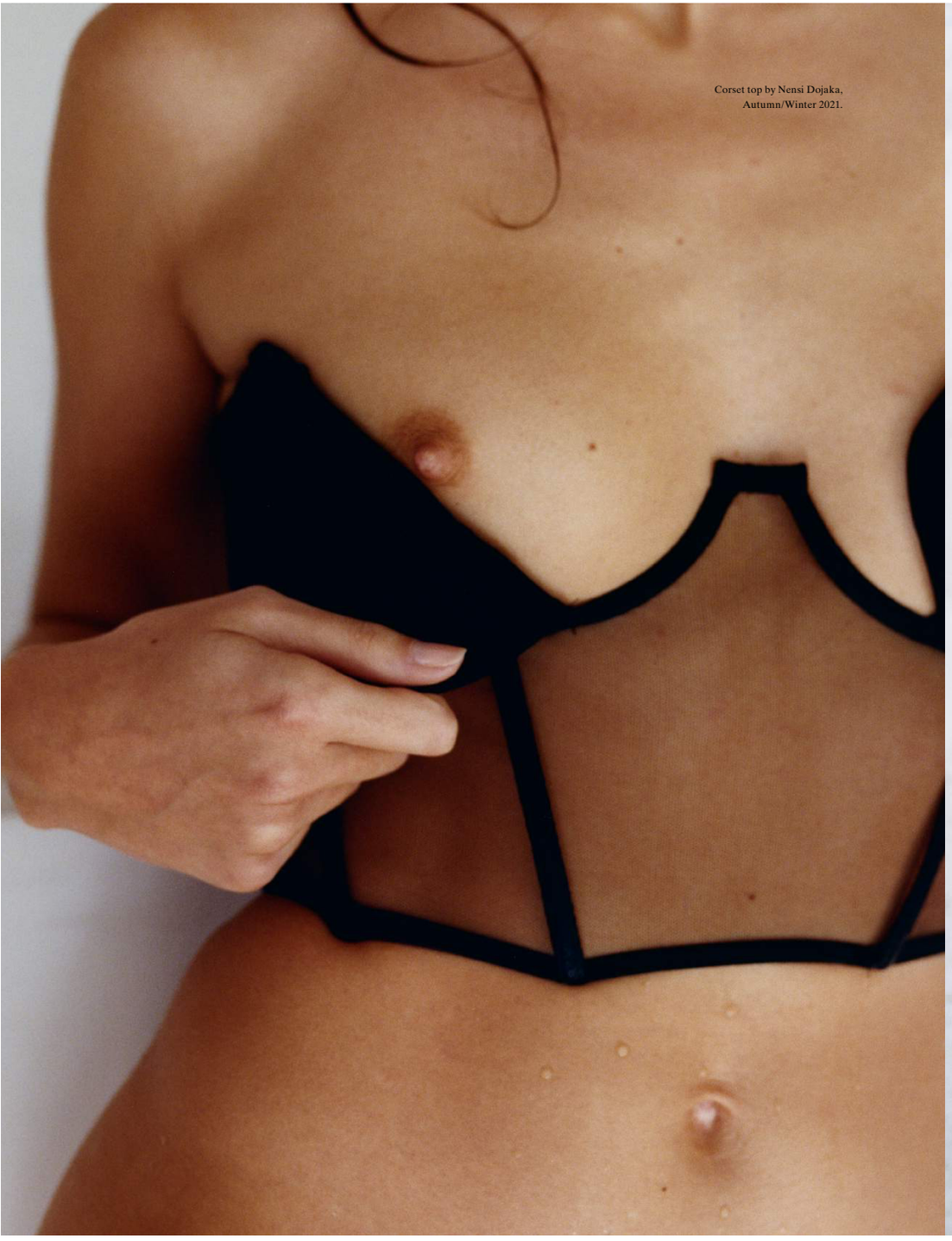
Supriya Lele, KNWLS and Nensi Dojaka, on London’s new wave of womenswear, designed by women for women.

Text and interviews by Vanessa Ohaha
Photographs by Drew Vickers
Styling by Vanessa Reid

Previous page:
Top by Supriya Lele, Spring/Summer 2020.

This page:
Dana wears top and skirt by Nensi Dojaka,
Autumn/Winter 2020.

Trousers by KNWLS,
Autumn/Winter 2020.



Corset top by Nensi Dojaka,
Autumn/Winter 2021.

Majesty wears dress and
bra by Supriya Lele,
Spring/Summer 2020.

Dana wears dress by Nensi Dojaka,
Autumn/Winter 2021.

Ivy wears shirt, pink bra, trousers and
skirt by Supriya Lele, Autumn/Winter 2021 and
white bra by Supriya Lele, Spring/Summer 2022.

Majesty wears Nensi Dojaka,
Autumn/Winter 2021.

Top by Supriya Lele,
Spring/Summer 2020.

Majesty wears top, shorts and cowboy hat by KNWLS, Spring/Summer 2020.

Top by Supriya Lele, Spring/Summer 2021.

Daria wears dress and shorts by KNWLS,
Spring/Summer 2021.

Daria wears top by KNWLS,
Spring/Summer 2021.

Daria wears top and skirt by Supriya Lele,
Spring/Summer 2022.

Dana wears top by KNWLS,
Autumn/Winter 2021.

Majesty wears dress by Supriya Lele,
Spring/Summer 2021.

Bra by KNWLS, Spring/Summer 2021.

Majesty and Ivy wear bodysuits
by Nensi Dojaka, Autumn/Winter 2020.

Despite Brexit and Covid-19 with its many lockdowns, London's fashion infrastructure has remained intact. With its renowned fashion schools and organizations such as Fashion East and the British Fashion Council, the city is still the place that recognizes perhaps better than any other the value (financial or otherwise) of nurturing young designers and their talent. Out of this changed but still vibrant scene have emerged three labels, Supriya Lele, KNWLS and Nensi Dojaka. Designed by women for women and already being worn by Rihanna, Dua Lipa and Bella Hadid, their clothing shares an appreciation of the female form, telling nuanced and delicate stories from a female viewpoint.

British-Indian designer Supriya Lele's eponymous label, founded in 2016, is deeply rooted in her own cross-cultural point of view, examining her Indian heritage and British cultural identity through drapery and twisted sheer dresses. Lele's first standalone show, a highlight of London Fashion Week in 2019, led to her selection as a finalist for the LVMH Prize 2020.

Since her debut collection for Spring/Summer 2018, Charlotte Knowles has established a reputation for clothing that is a rich celebration of women's sexuality. KNWLS, the South London-based label she founded with design partner Alexandre Arsenault, uses a corsetry and underwear-influenced aesthetic to deconstruct ideas of what 'sexy' can mean.

Winner of the 2021 LVMH Prize and already a celebrity favourite, Albanian designer Nensi Dojaka creates lingerie-inspired dresses and cut-out pieces that play with 1990s aesthetics, sheer fabrics and layering to express a vision of modern femininity that embraces both vulnerability and strength.

***System* met the designers to discuss their work and influences, the importance of creating for women, and their dreams for the future of British fashion.**

Supriya Lele

How important a role does your cultural background play when you're designing a collection?
Supriya Lele The core of my brand is an exploration of my identity and my heritage. Having been born and brought up in the UK but being of Indian heritage, there is a tension and balance between the two cultures that I find a continuous source of inspiration and identity. It continues to evolve, as I unpack more about myself as the years go on and so I don't think it's something I will ever not explore in terms of my work. Having these conversations about identity through clothing is important.

Your clothes show an evident love and respect for the female form. What do you think of the word 'sexy' in relation to your work?
I don't necessarily have an issue with the word, but what does it mean? Through whose lens are we seeing something as sexy? My work is a reinterpretation of what I grew up seeing: going to India and being exposed to the culture through the female lens, my family wearing these semi-sheer saris and having varying degrees of skin showing. I always felt like it was a love letter to the female form. It conceals and reveals; it's attractive; it's sensual; it's respectful. The word 'sexy' just doesn't mean anything to me. My work is evocative, powerful, daring, and the word 'sexy' reduces it down to imagery I don't identify with.

How has your work evolved since you first began?
At the beginning, I was really trying to put myself out there. I was doing work that I felt I hadn't seen before and many aspects of it were quite new to other people. The first few seasons, I was trying to find my feet and what I was trying to say as a designer, while building a solid fan base. Now it's really more about reconsolidating my vision. I have built quite a large personal client base, so alongside my wholesale clients, there are interesting women purchasing the clothes. That helps me ground the work and redirect it. It's really about re-establishing the woman each season.

Who is the Supriya Lele woman?
When I first started out, I used to think that this was an exploration of myself. Now I have this extensive client list, I can see who my women are: from art curators like Antonia Marsh to designers like Gaia Repossi, to stylists and lots of female artists. It's exciting to have a connection with a super talented artist, but, you know, my mum wears my pieces, too. They just need to have an amazing connection with the clothes. Oh, Rihanna likes the clothes! She is the woman of the world; she's not afraid to be herself.

What were the biggest inspirations, that made you want to be a designer?
A big, melting pot of things. My parents were just really into clothes. We'd find ourselves talking about clothes. I grew up in the 1990s and we'd watch [weekly TV music show] *Top of the Pops* with my mum and my friends, just to see what was hot in pop culture. I was also really into music, so I would go to concerts and was part of a lot of subcultures. It was pre-Internet and so I really immersed myself in the culture of things I was interested in, being a bit of a nerd, learning about the things I liked.

Is there a particular subcultural period that influences your design philosophy?
Like most teenagers, I had a phase where I was very into being goth. But it wasn't exactly about that specifically for me, it was about the 'anti' ethos. The 1990s designers who really embodied that kind of anti-ness would be Margiela and Helmut Lang. They were really just doing their thing. It was kind of revolutionary and against the grain in some respects. I have nothing but admiration for designers who push against what's popular. I guess that comes from me feeling like an anomaly. I'm just doing what I want to do.

Why did you focus on the female form and how do you question what femininity means in your design?
I'm a draper; that's how I work. I learned draping from helping my mother and my granny put their saris on and so it just felt like a natural way for me to work. I don't think I'm trying to pose a question about femininity. I just want to be able to have roots in India and here in England, then take those references, reduce them to skeletal forms, reinterpret them, and make them into something that feels modern. It's about these whispers and notions of things, and the feeling it gives, like empowered confidence.

Post-pandemic, what is the current state of London Fashion Week?
I recently went back to catwalk format, but before that we had done a shoot and appointments and a film. I enjoyed each different method. I did a show this season because it felt like the right thing to do. It's easier now to present in whatever way feels right for you and your brand. That takes a weight off your shoulders; you can just go with the flow. Things are returning, but it still feels tentative in some respects, which is really cool.

Your clothes have been worn by celebrities and stars, so who would you like to see wear them next?
If *anyone* wears something of mine, then it means I'm doing something right.

Daria wears dress by Supriya Lele, Spring/Summer 2022.

KNWLS

How would you describe the KNWLS design philosophy?
Charlotte Knowles: The label has always been about the relationship between intimacy and sensuality, and power and strength. There's also a connection with the digital age and how ideas of sensuality are presented in the digital world.

Why womenswear?
Charlotte: I identify with it because I am a woman and the way I design is very personal. We're also interested in a menswear take on womenswear and how garments are finished and tailored. We were also taken by challenging how people see womenswear and putting out garments that are well developed.

What are some of your biggest inspirations?
Charlotte: The people who surround us, watching a movie, chatting with our friends or people we respect. Like Grimes sending us a random manga character that she thinks fits the brand's aesthetic. All these kinds of things build this world. We grew up in the 1990s and 2000s, so we think about extracting things from those years. There are so many subcultural elements from that era, which we add to that exchange with the people around us, to create this effervescence.

Are there any other subcultural eras that influence your design?
Charlotte: We draw from all eras. Some of the underwear I look at is from the 1800s. It is such an eclectic mix, and the reality is that a lot of these eras are regurgitations of previous ones; it's all kind of linked together. The 2000s is just because we grew up in that era, so it's kind of embedded in our psyche.

What do you think about the notion of 'sexy' in relation to your designs, and how has that evolved for you?
Charlotte Knowles and Alexandre Arsenault: For us, achieving sexy is like walking a fine line. We like to balance a sense of conceal and reveal, something dangerous with something in control. That can be the way the clothes reveal the body or through the sheerness of the fabric and layering, which then results in something complicated, strong and sharp. We always try to add something dangerous, so that the girl is not just sexy, but also strong and in control. There's always something slightly unapproachable, like a dangerous creature you have to appreciate from a distance. Even when we make underwear, it's never worn in the way you'd expect underwear would be worn. It's the fabrics or the techniques we use, like boning, which are always done in what we like to think is a futuristic manner. It does feel sexy, but for me that's not the word I would use. What we do is never vulgar; it's incredibly empowering and fierce.

What advice would you give to an aspiring womenswear designer?
Alexandre: Put the work in, it's about being driven. Surround yourself with good people, people who care about you as a person.
Charlotte: As a woman in this industry, I have sometimes felt a bit like the underdog. It's very important to just do what you want to do, especially when it is something that you love. It is very easy to be distracted by other people getting attention, but as long as your work speaks for itself and you exist through your work, you are going to find your own audience.

Which celebrity would you like to see wear your clothes next?
Charlotte: We are quite obsessed with Hunter Schafer and Olivia Wilde; I've always wanted her to wear something of ours. We need a Rihanna moment. She has worn some of our stuff, but she's never been photographed in it; she's always worn it under a big fur coat. We'd love a Rihanna moment.

Fashion shows were as affected by the pandemic as many other physical events or gatherings. What do you think of the current state of London Fashion Week?
Charlotte and Alexandre: We found it really refreshing to be able to release content where you controlled the final image. It's so unlike the runway where it's almost always completely out of your control. It also showed people that it's possible just to release your images or film and still be successful. Hopefully this period will show young brands that they can still be successful without having to stage a runway show.

Ivy wears top and trousers by KNWLS, Autumn/Winter 2021.

Models: Majesty Amare at Women Management, Daria Koshkina at Ford Models, Dana Smith at Ford Models, Ivy at MIKAs Stockholm.
Photography assistants: Christian Robinson, Estelle Chauffour, Elie Benistant, Alisa Dyundik. Styling assistants: Joel Traptow and Andreea Georgiana Rădoi.

Nensi Dojaka

How has your cultural background influenced your design and creative process?
Nensi Dojaka: I was never really inspired by my cultural background, but the way I was brought up had a big impact on the things I'm doing now. I was in drawing classes when I was very young. My parents put a lot of effort into making sure I was trained in the arts even though it wasn't a thing in Albania, and in many ways still isn't. I always knew I was going to end up in the arts. That said, I'm not really inspired by the visual aspects of my background, but more by how I was raised.

How important was it that you had supportive parents?
Very important. It's a bit of a risk when you pursue a career in the arts because the future is never really clear. I also didn't know how I wanted to continue my career, but my parents believed in me, even when I made the switch from lingerie to womenswear.

A lot of your work shows your lingerie background by being flattering to the female form. What do you think of the word 'sexy' to describe the clothes you design?
For a woman to feel sexy she needs to feel powerful and confident in how she looks when she's wearing the clothes. Sexy and powerful go hand in hand and that's very important for how women are viewed. The way I do it is by mixing feminine details with more masculine aspects like tailoring and that juxtaposition is very important.

How have ideas of female empowerment appeared in your collections?
When I watch my runway shows, I love the look of a model wearing these strong trousers paired with a sexy bustier or bralet. The image of her walking down looks really strong, kind of aggressive, but still very female. To me, that visual carries the message of an empowered woman.

How has your work evolved since you began?
When I first started, it was more visual, putting things together, but when I went to Saint Martins for the MA programme, it became more about defining the woman I make clothes for. She's becoming more mature, more self-aware and confident now. That may be a reflection of my getting older as well.

What were your biggest inspirations growing up? What made you want to be a designer?
We didn't have a lot of cultural events in Albania when I was younger, but my drawing classes were super inspiring. Then when I came to the UK at 16, I went to a Mark Rothko exhibition and all that art stuck in my mind. It confirmed to me that I wanted to work in the arts, and then fashion became my medium.

What subcultural period had a big impact on your design?
Definitely the 1990s. Mainly because designers in the 1990s seem to have done what I want to do. At the time it was a bit more sexualized, while I'm trying to make it a bit more empowering for women. I was also inspired by how clean and minimal a lot of the clothes were back then. When I design, I begin with those small details, and it can initially look a bit messy, but at the end it has to look clean and nicely resolved.

What would you say to an aspiring young female London-based designer?
Persevere and stick to what you believe in, especially when you may not have the same support as your peers. It is important to have trust in yourself until the results start to show, and others start to believe in what you're doing as well. Carefully analyse why it is that you're doing what you're doing so that you can have faith in the choices you are making.

Is a sense of community important for women in fashion?
It is important to have a community, to feel supported by other people in the industry, and to share thoughts. I work with a lot of women. My stylist Francesca Burns is someone who I really respect and my team is filled with women I admire.

What is some of the best advice that you have been given?
At the LVMH Prize, I was told to continue what I was doing without losing sight of it because it can be easy to succumb to commercial pressures. I think that was such good advice.

What celebrity would you like to see wear your clothes next?
I loved seeing Zendaya in my clothes; I love her, so I really enjoyed that moment. Next, maybe someone like Anya Taylor-Joy. I think she's very intelligent, I love how she's always talking about books. She'd be great.

Dana wears dress by Nensi Dojaka, Autumn/Winter 2021.

Make-up: Lucy Bridge at Streeters. Make-up assistants: Yin Liu and Ludivine François. Hair: Soichi Inagaki at Art Partner. Hair assistant: Masayoshi Fujita. Movement director: Pat Boguslawski at Streeters. Casting: Julia Lange at Artistry London. Production: Farago Projects.

BALENCIAGA

BALENCIAGA

Looks of the season

Autumn/Winter 2021-2022

Photographs by Carlijn Jacobs
Styling by Haley Wollens

Previous page:
Britt wears jacket, skirt and garter by Chanel,
and faux-fur cuff by Haley Wollens Studio.

This page:
Precious wears dress and boots by Hermès
and faux-fur cuff by Haley Wollens Studio.

Irene wears dress and boots by Bottega Veneta,
earrings by Mugler, and stylist's own stockings.

Precious wears bra top, panties,
corset (as skirt),
gloves and shoes by Gucci,
and bracelet by Van Cleef & Arpels.

Chu wears jumper, boots and bag by Prada,
with belt made with gloves by Prada.

Vasilina wears trousers (as top), dress and bracelet bag by Loewe, and earring by Saint Laurent.

Valentine wears skirt, boots and bag by Louis Vuitton.

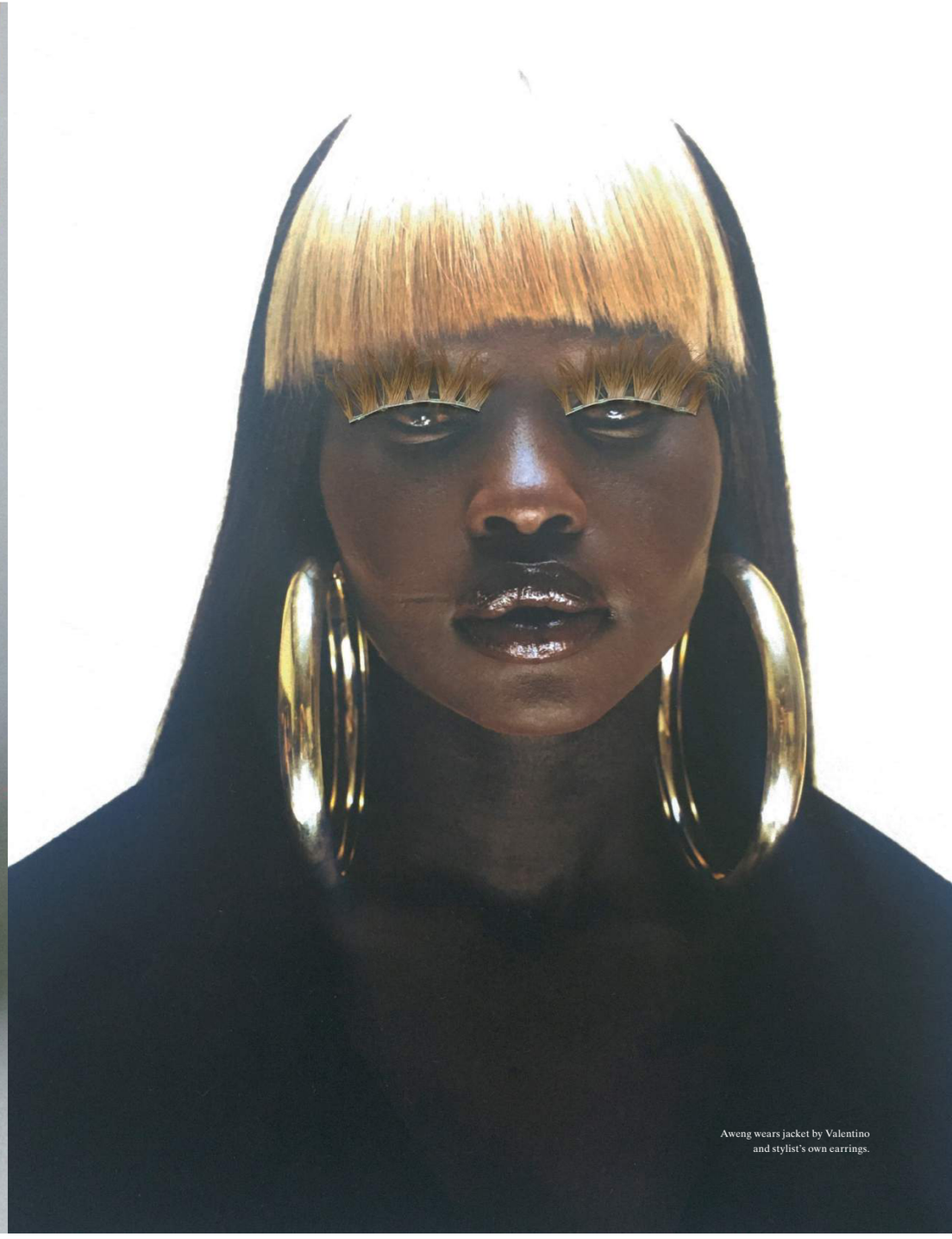
Britt wears turtleneck by Maison Margiela, skirt by Y/Project, earrings by Mugler, and faux-fur stole by Haley Wollens Studio.

Irene wears beanie, coat, jumper and skirt by Miu Miu,
shoes by Saint Laurent, and faux-fur cuff by Haley Wollens Studio.

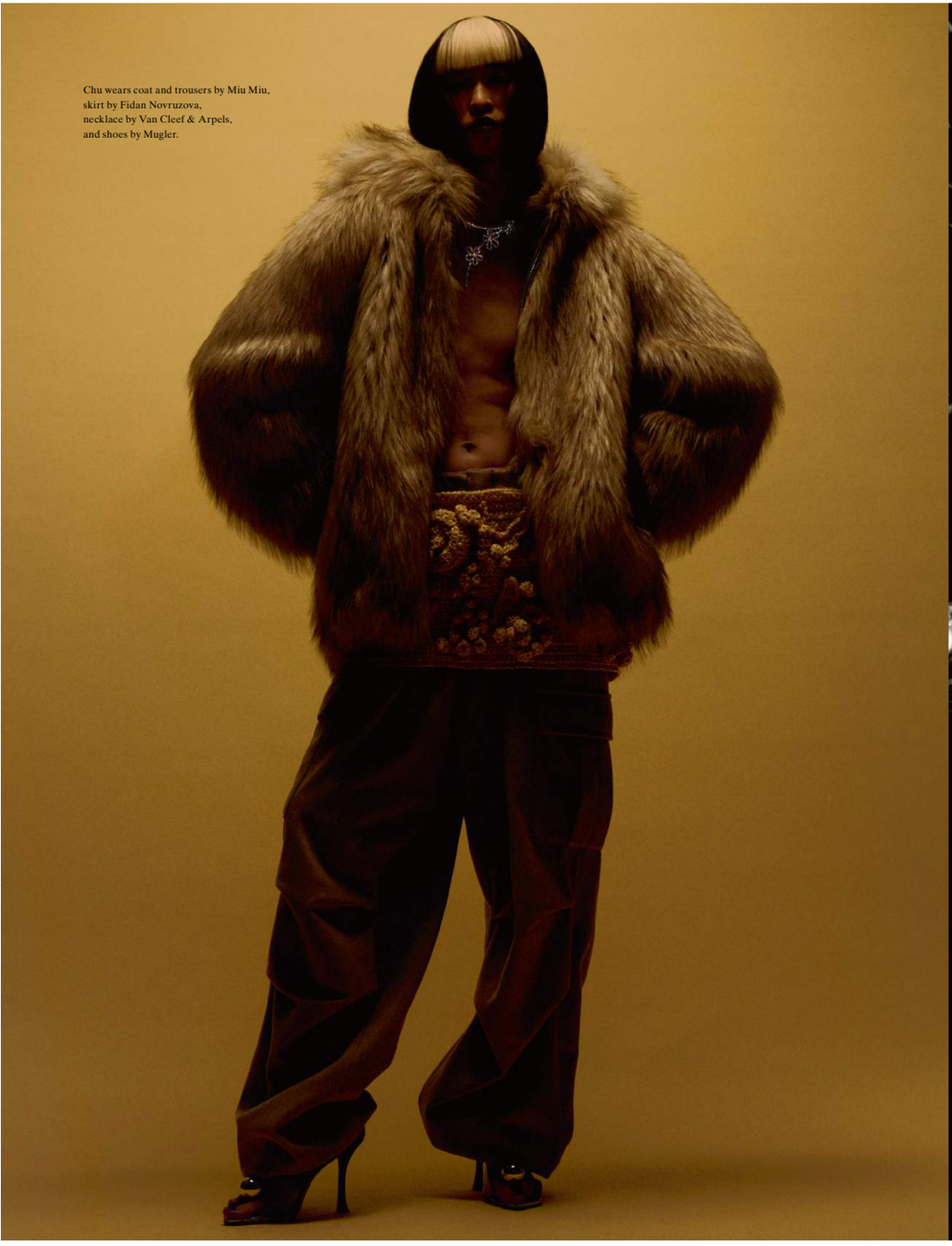
Britt wears jacket by Louis Vuitton,
skirt by Moncler, and boots by Chanel.

Ali wears dress and boots by Stella McCartney, earrings by Repossi, and stylist's own stockings.

Shoes by Burberry.



Aweng wears jacket by Valentino
and stylist's own earrings.



Chu wears coat and trousers by Miu Miu,
skirt by Fidan Novruzova,
necklace by Van Cleef & Arpels,
and shoes by Mugler.

Aweng wears a jumpsuit, skirt, hood, ring,
earrings and shoes by Mugler,
and stylist's own gold anklet.

Irene wears jacket by Celine,
dress and boots by Valentino, and
necklace by Beatrice Bonino for Vejas.

Ali wears dress and boots by Stella McCartney,
earrings by Repossi,
and stylist's own stockings.

Chu wears coat by Balenciaga and stylist's own stockings.

Valentine wears watch by Cartier
and earring by Mugler.

Vasilina wears ring by Repossi, dress and tights by Fendi,
and ring and earring by Repossi.

Precious wears dress by Alexander McQueen, rhinestone top by Gucci, necklace by Jil Sander, shoes by Mugler, and leg warmers by Haley Wollens Studio.

Aweng wears jacket, dress (worn as skirt) and bag by Valentino, boots by Alaïa, and stylist's own earrings.

Britt wears scarf (worn as dress) by Chloé.

Models: Aweng Chuol at IMG Models, Precious Kevin at Titanium Management, Britt Oosten at Oui Management, Vasilina Kireenko at Ford Models, Chu Wong at Elite, Ali Ridgway at The Claw Models, Valentine at Revolt, Irene Guarenas at Oui Management. Make-up: Masae Ito at Blend Management. Hair: Olivier Schawalder at Bryant Artists. Nails: Sylvie Macmillan. Casting: Julia Lange. Photography assistant: Pierre Nowak. Digital operator: Amélie Hassan. Stylist assistants: Audrey Petit, Anastasia Gumyk, Laurent Ben Henni, Esther Talaber. Make-up assistant: Louise Rouger. Bryant Artists. Hair-styling assistant: Damien Lacoussade. Nail assistant: Inès Ould Kaci. Set designer: Sophear Van at Art + Commerce. Dog: Louis. Production: Cinq Étoiles Productions

Aweng wears bodysuit by Rick Owens, skirt and belt by Dior, boots by Fendi, and stylist's own panties.

‘I love this one!’

Chanel’s Spring/Summer 2022 accessories, as chosen by 12 of our favourite stylists.

Photographs by Charles Negre

Emanuelle Alt

Black leather ballet flats embellished with ankle bracelet

'This is the perfect ballerina shoe, with all the dream codes of Chanel, and a little ankle bracelet that makes it sexy.'

Imruh Asha

Blue bracelet in resin

'I love abstract and simple shapes, colours and textures; this bracelet ticks all the boxes.'

Carlyne Cerf de Dudzeele

Purple bag in leather and metal

‘I am obsesssed totally with this bag! The proportion, the fat chain, the colour!
CLASSIC CHIC, PERFECTION! C’est tout ce que j’aime!
Sur le runway, il est en blanc, noir et rose, mais c’est le mauve qui me rend dingue…’

Marie Chaix

Chanel N°5 bottle-shaped minaudière in golden brass and metal

‘The classic Chanel N°5 perfume bottle as a gold bag reminds me of how I was first introduced to fashion as a child living in the countryside: through perfumes. The gold makes it even more solid and heavy with chic and so iconic.’

Ib Kamara

Necklace in metal, strass, glass beads and stones

'I like the simplicity of it and yet it stands out. It feels easy to wear.'

Suzanne Koller

Black bag in leather and metal

'I love this interpretation of the classic, timeless Chanel handbag with its oversized leather-woven gold chain. The Chanel bag is one of my go-to classics. I bought mine over 20 years ago and still love it. I used to buy them for my assistants as goodbye gifts, so they would always remember the time they spent with me and to thank them for their hard work!'

Lucia Liu

White-and-black heeled sandals in logo-printed leather

'I love the informality that a pair of platform shoes brings to the whole look, not too aggressive but cool and girly. This black-and-white Chanel monogram pair have a great balance of elegance and humour.'

Max Pearmain

Earrings in metal and resin

'Chanel is about two differing energies – desire and democracy. It's the only brand that I've worked with that allows those two almost opposites to coexist. That prompts the most ardent fashion supporters to talk about the house in the same hushed tones as a 16-year-old from the suburbs. And it's the only brand I know that could prompt that intensity with something as simple as an earring. It's a precious and rare alchemy!'

Vanessa Reid

Heart bag in leather and metal

'The Chanel heart bag would be my choice. It reminds me of the first bit of Chanel I ever owned, in the 1990s: a black patent-leather heart-shaped bag with white patent logo. Iconic. I lost it on the dancefloor – I need to replace it with this one.'

Carine Roitfeld

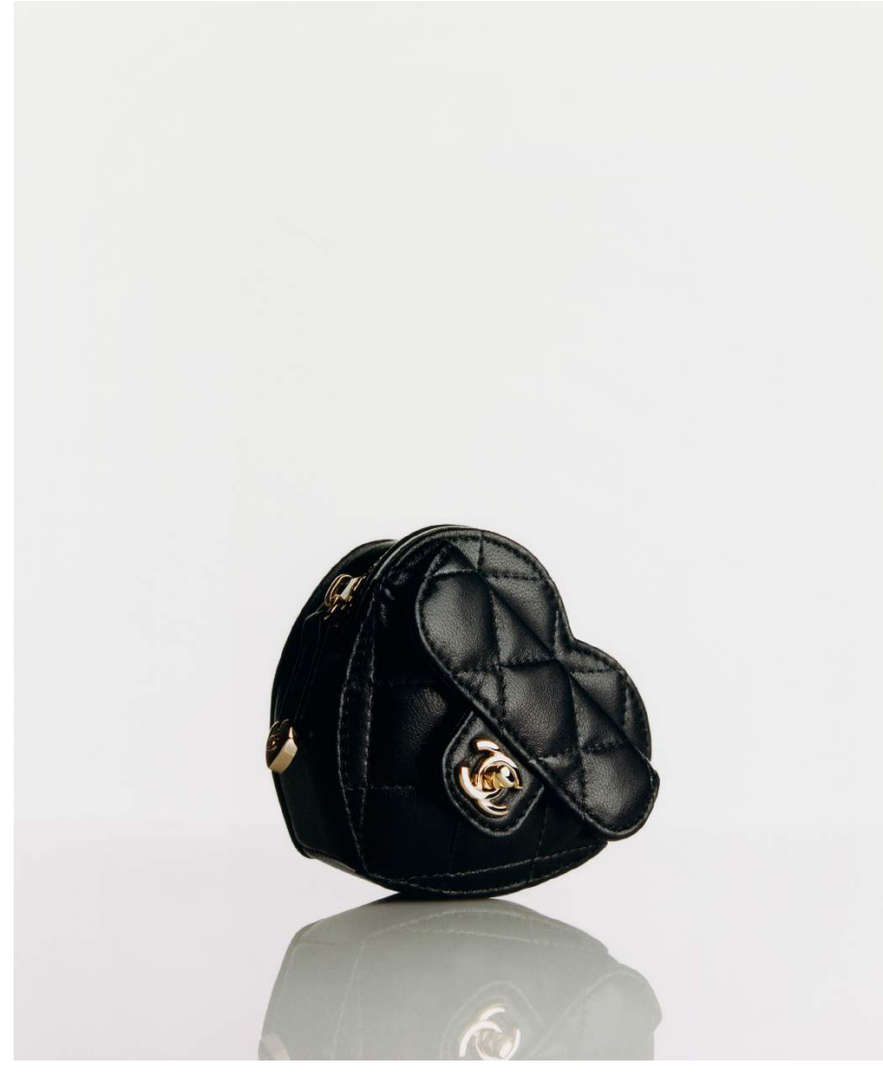
Chanel N°5 bottle-shaped necklace in metal and resin

'My favourite: the bottle of Chanel N°5 as a necklace!'

Lotta Volkova

Bag in shiny black leather and metal

'I love this one!'



Haley Wollens

Black heart bracelet bag in leather and metal

'Oddly enough, I've never been much of a bag girl; I spent years piling my belongings into bomber-jacket pockets. This bracelet bag is the perfect, subtle statement piece. Saucy minimalist is the mood I'm in for dressing these days.'

‘I am a hope dealer.’

For Omoyemi Akerele, founder of Lagos Fashion and Design Week, the future of the region lies in making the global local.

By Rana Toofanian
Portrait by Akinola Davies Jr.

'You don't just get up and start a fashion week,' says Omoyemi Akerele. Yet in 2011, that's exactly what she did, founding Lagos Fashion and Design Week with the aim of developing and giving a platform to Nigerian talent. Ten years on, Akerele is described as one of the most important catalysts behind Nigeria's flourishing fashion scene. Through Lagos Fashion and Design Week, her talent-scouting platform Fashion Focus, and her fashion-business development agency Style House Files, Akerele has showcased the work of rising design stars, including Orange Culture and Kenneth Ize, and provided business mentoring and creative workshops to countless more.

The Covid pandemic has demonstrated just how close economies can get to falling apart, and the fashion industry, which continues to be overly reliant on imported goods and overseas markets, is no exception. Today, the next generation of Nigerian creatives are faced with bleak prospects, worsened by impending economic crises. Akerele is determined to lessen their burden by rewiring Nigeria's fashion system to help fresh talent. It's a mindset she hopes will spread outside her home country and make space for a new era of seamless pan-African cultural exchange.

Following the latest Lagos Fashion Week in November 2021, *System* spoke to Akerele about the current state of Nigerian fashion and what the next decade could hold in store.

You worked as a lawyer before founding Lagos Fashion Week and Style House Files. How did you move from law to a career in fashion?

Omoyemi Akerele: This is a story I never get tired of sharing because when I think of how I started and where we are today, I didn't see it coming. When I decided to walk out of my job as a lawyer in 2004, the reason was purely that I was not enjoying what I was doing. I worked around people who seemed to be enjoying their jobs and I wanted something that would give me a sense of belonging. It didn't start with fashion, but rather with corporate consulting work and personal branding. Fashion crept in. Then, when I started working in a fashion magazine, I realized that there was a gaping hole between the designers who imagine the clothes and the artisans who work tirelessly behind the scenes to co-create them with the designers: the Afro manufacturers and even sewing machinists in ateliers and workshops across the continent who stitch these things together and bring them to life, and the communities where we source the materials. It was important to step back and see how we could bring all of that together in a way that ensured everyone benefitted.

Growing up in Lagos, what was your interest in and exposure to fashion?

I was born and bred in Lagos in a family of seven children, with my mum and dad. My first exposure to fashion was probably the way that my mum dressed us up. It was very feminine; we wore dresses a lot. Fast-forward to pre-teen and teenage years when my friends were wearing jeans, cool T-shirts and leggings, and I was still wearing a frock. I was like, 'I want jeans and a T-shirt!' My mum was in shock, like, 'Do you know how much this dress cost?' Realizing that I was really not that feminine a dresser was my first 'aha moment'.

I had always been particular about what I wear and how I wear it, but not enough to turn it into a career. At one point I had a girlfriend who was running a brand and had to relocate outside Nigeria. She asked me if I wanted to buy her business and factory. I was still certain that I was meant to study law and so I told her, 'No, I have no interest.' I had just got married and I was pregnant with our first child, and that gave me time to do a lot of soul searching. I realized that fashion had always been there in my subconscious. My husband and I had also begun conversations with companies like Mango about bringing the franchise to Nigeria.

'Manufacturing was the second biggest employer in Nigeria in the 1980s, but there was a gradual decline until only 14 textile factories remained in operation.'

What was the result of those talks?

We'd also been in discussions with other companies, like United Colors of Benetton, but I was obsessed with Mango at the time and we both thought bringing it to Nigeria would be a really good idea. So, we went to Spain and had the meetings. Thankfully we had done a lot of groundwork and due diligence and listened to the advice we had been given because only six months later government import policies and regulations changed. If we'd invested at that time we would have lost everything. That was the turning point, when I said, 'I am not going to waste my time or energy to build a brand for someone based outside of Nigeria.'

You went on to work as a fashion stylist and editor at *True Love* around 2005?

Yes, and I also launched a company with my partner at the time, Bola Balogun, under the name Exclusive Styling, where we worked on some really exciting projects. We styled the presenters, contenders and music artists featured on TV shows like *Big Brother* and *Idols West Africa*, as well as shows that had just been launched in Nigeria like *Deal or No Deal*. For a while I worked with companies giving talks on the importance of making a good first impression, until I was offered a job at *True Love* magazine as a stylist assistant. I had to work my way to the top, but less than a year later, I was appointed the magazine's fashion editor. It was during that time that I understood that disconnect between the designers and those sourcing the fabrics, as well as the between the supply chain and retail. I realized I was interested not just in the public-facing image and design side of things, but also in what happens when clothes are produced. How do you sell them, market them, and wear them?

'Nigeria had gone through a phase where the influx of imports from China and elsewhere had led to a decline in Nigerians wearing Nigerian clothes.'

What was the fashion landscape like in Nigeria at that time?

Nigeria had gone through a phase where the influx of imports from China and elsewhere had led to a decline in Nigerians wearing Nigerian clothes. As a result, local industry and textile manufacturers had suffered, which meant the whole value chain suffered. [Manufacturing] was the second biggest employer in Nigeria in the 1980s, but there was this gradual decline until only 13 or 14 textile factories remained in operation. So I was curious to find out how I could contribute beyond just making editorials and shooting their collections. Styling and consulting are great, but I'd realized there was this gap and that someone needed to fill it. That was something I had to debate: what can I do here? Why a fashion week? For me, it was meant to provide proof of concept.

You wanted to create something inherently Nigerian. What is the DNA of Nigerian fashion? How does it differ from New York or Parisian fashion?

When we started out, we decided to focus on what is happening in Nigeria. I knew that we had the talent here, and I thought we could bring people together and offer them a platform to show their work. Then through that we could train people and provide opportunities. We've never been able to do that on the scale we wanted, but it has still impacted on some of the brands we work with. Beyond that, a fashion week means bringing all those things together as a way to experience fashion from the whole continent, not just from Nigeria. To experience fashion is to experience culture. It means coming to Lagos and feeling the city's confidence; its energy cannot be rivalled. The collections we show tell a story of how diverse and dynamic our culture is. They speak to historical references, resilience and grit. All the obstacles designers face daily, but they are still able to create, celebrate and express who they are through their collections, season in, season out. It is about creativity and innovation, but it's also about creating jobs through collaboration.

How would you describe the fashion scene and manufacturing landscape in Nigeria and more broadly, in West Africa right now, particularly with Covid?

At Style House Files and Lagos Fashion Week, we have tried to reinforce some of the things we believe in, like co-creation and collaboration within our community. During the pandemic, for example, we brought people together to come up with creative solutions, from sourcing and producing PPE to supporting the government's attempts to reduce the spread of Covid. It was groundbreaking for us to see people in this fragmented ecosystem working together. Our community has been strengthened because we've realized that we can do more together. People have relied on each other for support and for encouragement. So while the biggest challenges we face as a fashion community are around sourcing, due to our long-standing dependence on imported raw materials, what has come out of the pandemic is that designers have joined with the wider community to build more integrated businesses. It reduces our carbon footprint and waste in a way that only sourcing locally and on demand can do. It has empowered craftsmen and local supply chains, and generated more income for our people and economy, in the midst of inflation.

There is a huge market for secondhand clothes across Africa, specifically in West Africa and in Nigeria. What are some of the problems with this retail ecosystem? How are new designers impacted if these shipping containers of clothes keep arriving?

People often think they're doing

something laudable by sending all the clothes they no longer wear over to Africa where people need them. Yet there is a more fundamental problem: companies and brands all over the world are overproducing and people are consuming and buying more than they need. The problem is this culture of waste. It is important to establish that. Africa is not the solution to the global waste problem or the overproduction and over-consumption of goods in the West.

Closer to home, the problem is affecting the local textile industry. The creation of this secondhand market, which can serve a large part of the population, is discouraging local production that could create jobs for Nigerians. Local production also means you can trace garments from sourcing to the final product in a way that benefits the economy, rather than these containers coming from Britain and elsewhere. Half of the contents are destroyed by the time they get here anyway. The solution is more about not creating waste in the first place.

Two of your initial intentions in starting Style House Files and Lagos Fashion Week were to help centralize and structure the local fashion system, and put Nigeria and Lagos on the map. After almost a decade, do you think you have met these goals?
We started out by putting Lagos on the fashion map and showing that it is possible to open the gates of business in Africa. There is talent, and beyond talent, there is a market, and beyond a market, there are people who have succeeded in running [a successful fashion business]. Within the first few years, I think we succeeded in doing that. Now, the bulk of our work is in building longevity and a structure that creates solid businesses. We have our work cut out for us and we're not at a point where we can give ourselves a pat on the back. However, we are on the right track. At first, we were strictly focused on providing a platform for designers to present their collections each year, but as we got more involved, we realized that we needed to do more skills-building and development. Beyond presenting their collections, we wanted to make sure designers could manufacture their garments locally or on the continent. We have since ensured meaningful conversations between the private and public sector and are exploring ways of solving the industry's infrastructural challenges. So much more needs to be done.

Some of these challenges are not particular to Nigeria, but they can sometimes incapacitate creatives and make them want to give up and just stop; some already have. We also realize that this happens in other fashion cities around the world. Challenges exist, so how do we work around them? That's why we believe that our collective task is to create a lasting structure that adds value to this creativity. These designers must be able to build businesses that can survive changes in the climate, to create communities of artisans who also benefit from them. What is really dear to my heart is how we equip our youth with skills and opportunities. It's the most important factor of all in a country with such high levels of youth unemployment.

You talk about the advancement of Nigerian fashion in the larger context of the African and West African apparel and fashion industry. How important is it to see the bigger pan-African picture?
Countries working together across the continent is the future. It's vital that we create room for knowledge exchange and transfer. I see the future as a Nigerian designer who opts to work with a community of artisans in Nairobi or Burkina Faso. So it's important we have a holistic approach because as the movement of people across the continent has increased, so has our footprint across other countries within Africa. The question becomes: how can we benefit from the African Continental Free Trade Area,[1] which has just been implemented and means the movement of goods across the continent is being simplified?

How do you select designers for Lagos Fashion Week and how is new talent discovered and fostered?
We are a small platform, so there is a natural limit to the number of designers we can present each year. This means the selection system is based not only on who is out there, but also what they are doing: how many collections can they produce a year? Where do they sell them? What is their design aesthetic? It's not just about talent, which is great; designers have to understand that if we give them this opportunity, they have to run with it. That is the criterion. The internal committee goes through lookbooks, websites or even just an Instagram page to decide. If you show with us, you are automatically invited to the next season if the brand has seen sufficient traction during the intervening year. It can't just be a hobby. That's sometimes been a bit restrictive because you can't keep bringing in new people. So, we have a platform for the young designers, which was once called Young Designer of the Year, but has since morphed into Fashion Focus. It has been our dedicated channel for introducing new talent to Lagos Fashion Week each year. We've showcased brands like Orange Culture, Lagos Space Programme, This Is Us, Kenneth Ize and Cynthia Abila,[2] and it's become an incubator over the last three or four years beyond just scouting for new talent.

We've realized that we can only foster new talent by collaborating with different organizations, such as the British Fashion Council. We've also worked with established designers in the industry who offer classes to encourage young designers. And we've worked on offering more one-to-one support. For example, our in-house team runs sessions and goes through different topics where people can get a deeper sense of the everyday aspects of running a fashion business. It's about offering that extra layer of support that young brands don't always have access to. There also has to be self-investment. We need to realize that African fashion has something tangible to offer the world, and that we need to work to bring it together, to bring it to life. It is important that, even though we might have our differences, we have to build these structures ourselves because I don't know that we'll ever get there if we keep waiting for a messiah to come and save us. So the building has to be done by ourselves, by our stakeholders, by our governments, our people. We have to build lasting structures to strengthen an ecosystem in which everyone matters.

Has there been sustained and meaningful interest in Lagos Fashion Week and its designers from the global fashion media and press ?
There is only so much the press can do. There are people who get on planes and come to Nigeria with their saviour complexes: 'We are going to save African fashion!' They get paid quite a lot and then go back to their lives. My question is, while they are away from Nigeria, what should the members of the local fashion community be doing? I say that they should focus on their businesses, selling wherever they sell, because sitting around waiting for hype can be a ride to nowhere. We are always mindful of telling people to straddle both worlds: absorb the attention when the press is here, but know where your market is.

Also, the press works better if the brands are actually in the stores because consumers at least have access to the products. We are about to launch a collaboration with Moda Operandi, and we've put designers in Selfridges, MatchesFashion, and so much more. But designers also need funding to be able to produce their work in commercial quantities so that the conversations about them in the press do more than just feed the hype. The most important thing is for the world to realize that African creators and African culture are not trends; it is who we are around the clock. We need to move beyond these narratives. Only then will it be easier for us to get round to the business of fashion. Otherwise we are just exposing the brands to be copied and exploited commercially.

What do you think the next decade looks like?
The mood is one of cautious optimism. I want to hold onto this because I am an incurable optimist – I am a hope dealer. We are operating in a weakened economy post-Covid, a lot of small businesses are on the verge of collapse. There is no sign of stability – economically, politically or even across our health sectors – so I believe the next decade lies in our collective mindfulness. To be able to co-create solutions to strengthen our existing ecosystem and ensure that creatives benefit from their work in a way that reverberates across the value chain. I believe that this could be a key strategy for equipping our brands, our creators and our designers with the tools that they need to survive the next decade.

You've said in the past that fashion saves lives. What did you mean?
One reason I do what I do is that giving up now is not an option; it is too late. We have rallied together with the support of these teams and a community that believes in us year in and year out. They have given their time and commitment to working on and showcasing the platform. We are all part of this community that really believes that creative and cultural industries can contribute to the economy and create jobs. In that sense, fashion *can* save lives. Our reason is to be able to create lasting opportunities that outlive us all, so that the next generation and the generation after them can also benefit from it. We do it because we have to.

'Beyond presenting their collections, we wanted to make sure designers can manufacture their garments locally or on the continent.'

1. The African Continental Free Trade Area is a trade agreement that was signed by 54 of the 55 African Union nations on March 21, 2018. It came into effect on January 1, 2021, and allows for free trade in goods, commodities and services between signatory nations.

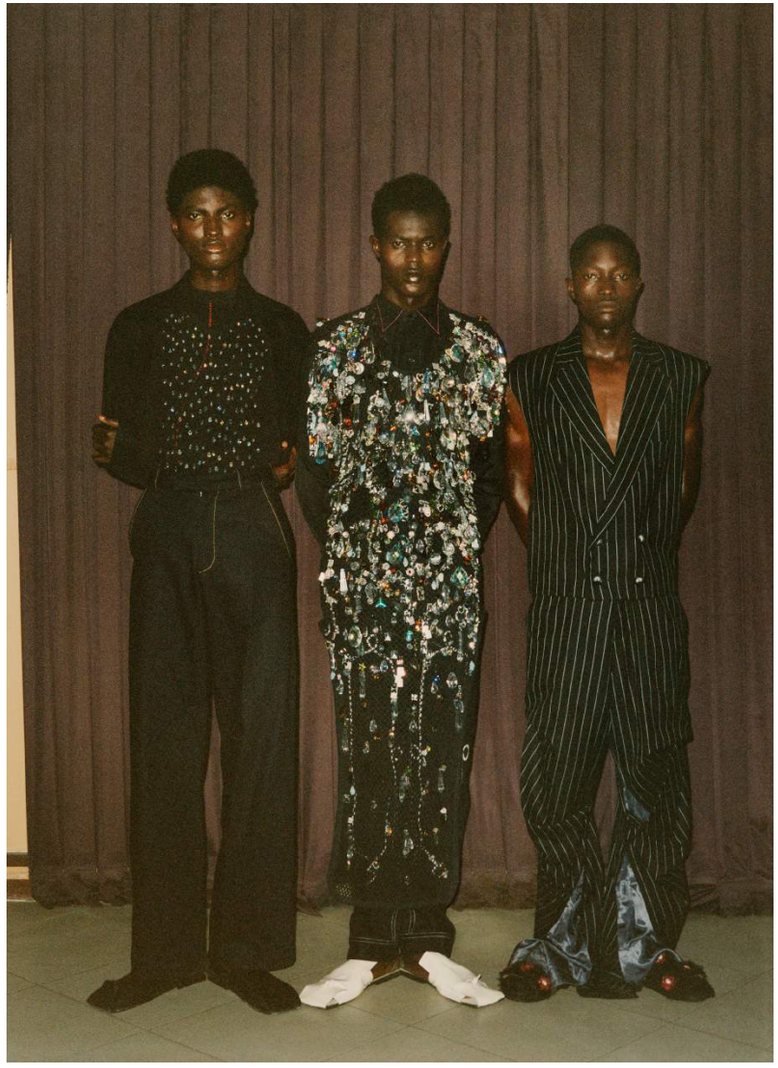
2. Designer Adebayo Okelawal's label Orange Culture was longlisted for the LVMH Prize in 2014 and has shown at New York Fashion Week. Kenneth Ize founded his eponymous label in 2013. A finalist for the LVMH Prize in 2019, he produced a capsule collection for the Karl Lagerfeld label in 2020, and showed his Spring/Summer 2022 collection at Paris Fashion Week in September 2021.

In Lagos

Photographs by Joshua Woods
Styling by Ola Ebiti

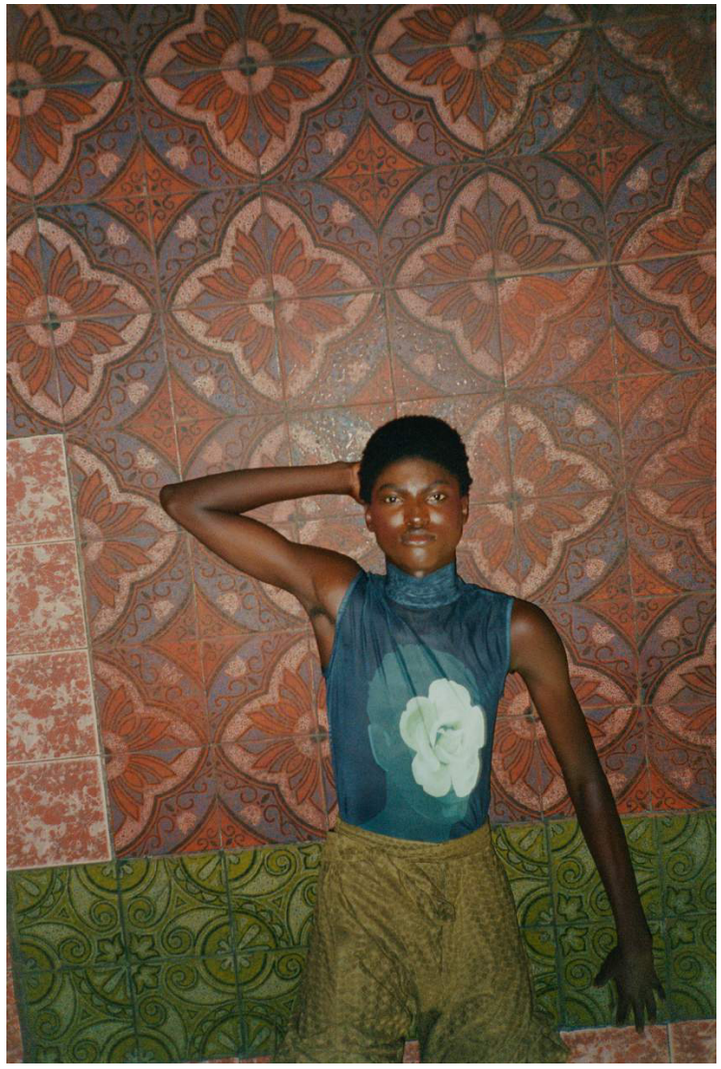
Previous page: Mohammed wears shorts by Orange Culture.
Rhenny wears top by Feben and skirt by Lisa Folawiyo Studio.

This page: Rhenny wears a dress by Marco and lace top by Lagos Space Programme.
Anthonia wears blue-dye dress by Lagos Space Programme.



Ebuka wears vest, black shirt and trousers by TJWHO.
Mohammed wears dress by Elfrida and shirt and trousers by TJWHO.
Peter wears waistcoat and trousers by Eilis Kennedy. All are wearing shoes by Maxivive.

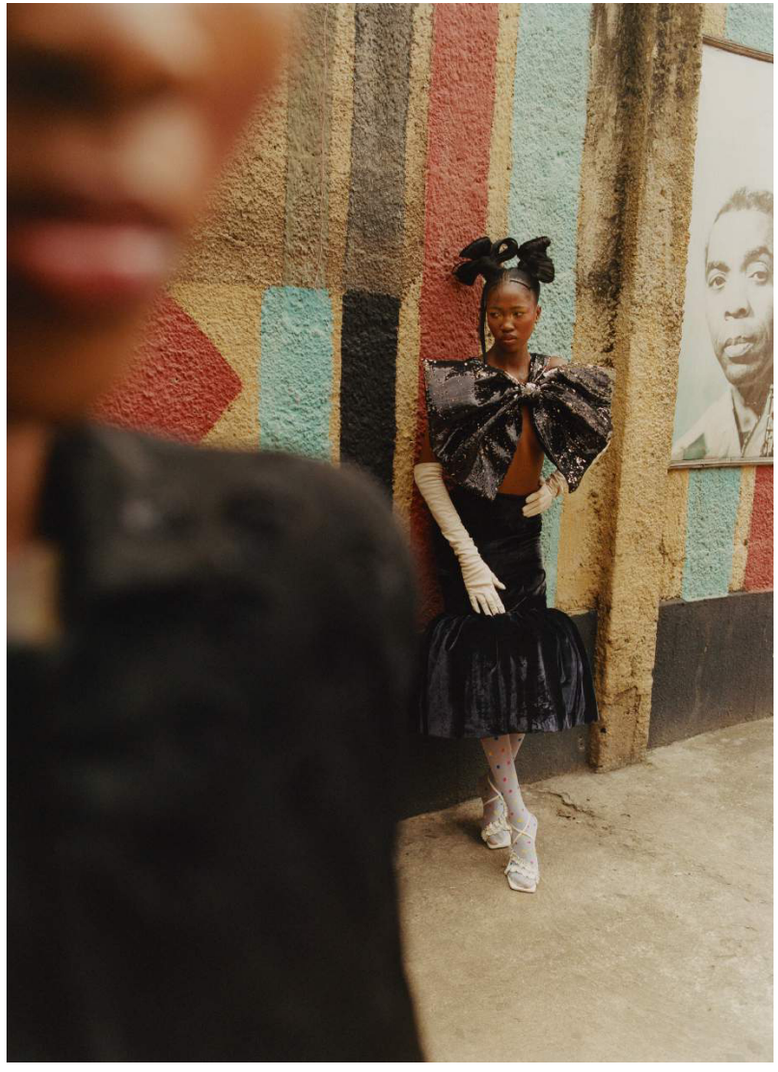
Rhenny wears green corset and wrap skirt by Banke Kuku.
Mohammed wears shirt by Franco-Appiah Baah
and trousers by Orange Culture.



Ebuka wears sleeveless top by Orange Culture and
trousers by Austrian Lace.

Mohammed wears shorts by Orange Culture.
Rhenny wears top by Feben and
skirt by Lisa Folawiyo Studio.

Precious wears dress by Lisa Folawiyo Studio.
Peter wears shirt by Orange Culture.



Rhenny wears embellished bow top by Vicnate,
and skirt and shoes by By Far.

Ebuka wears knitted wool jumper with
blazer details by Feben and trousers by Maxivive.

Anthonia wears purple shirt and trousers by Orange Culture,
and purple circular skirt by Marco.

Mohammed wears all Orange Culture
and shoes by Maxivive.

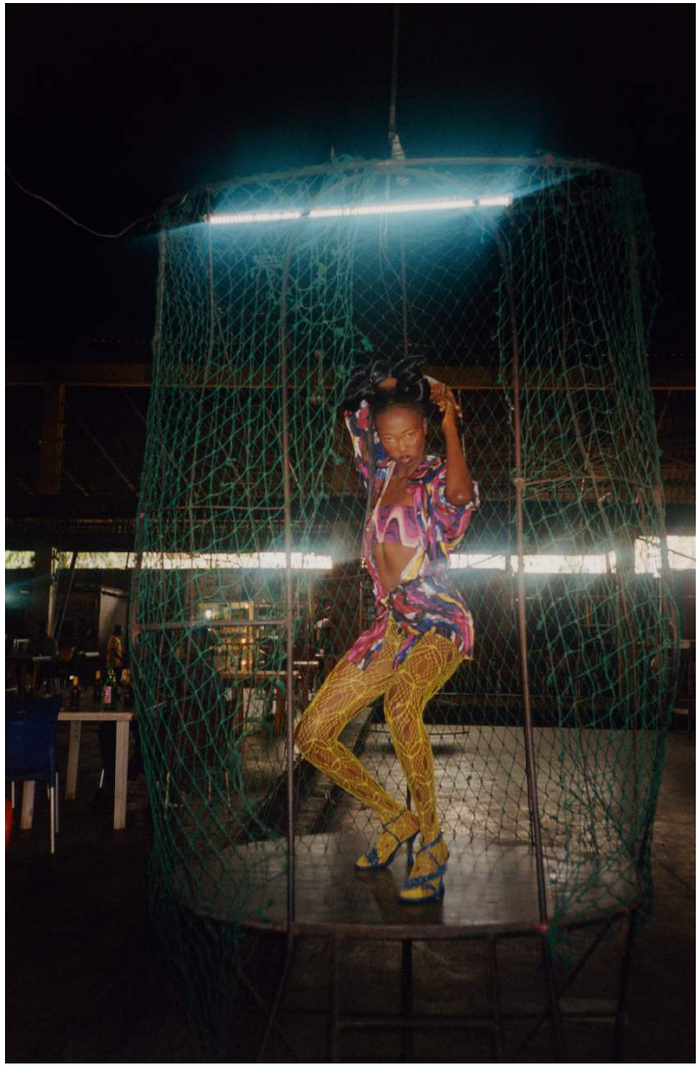
Peter wears blazer and shirt by Maxivive.

Precious wears dress by Franco-Appiah Baah.

Peter wears blazer and shirt by Maxivive, and skirt by Tokyo James.
Ebuka wears blazer, waistcoat and skirt by
Lagos Space Programme, and white shirt by Maxivive.

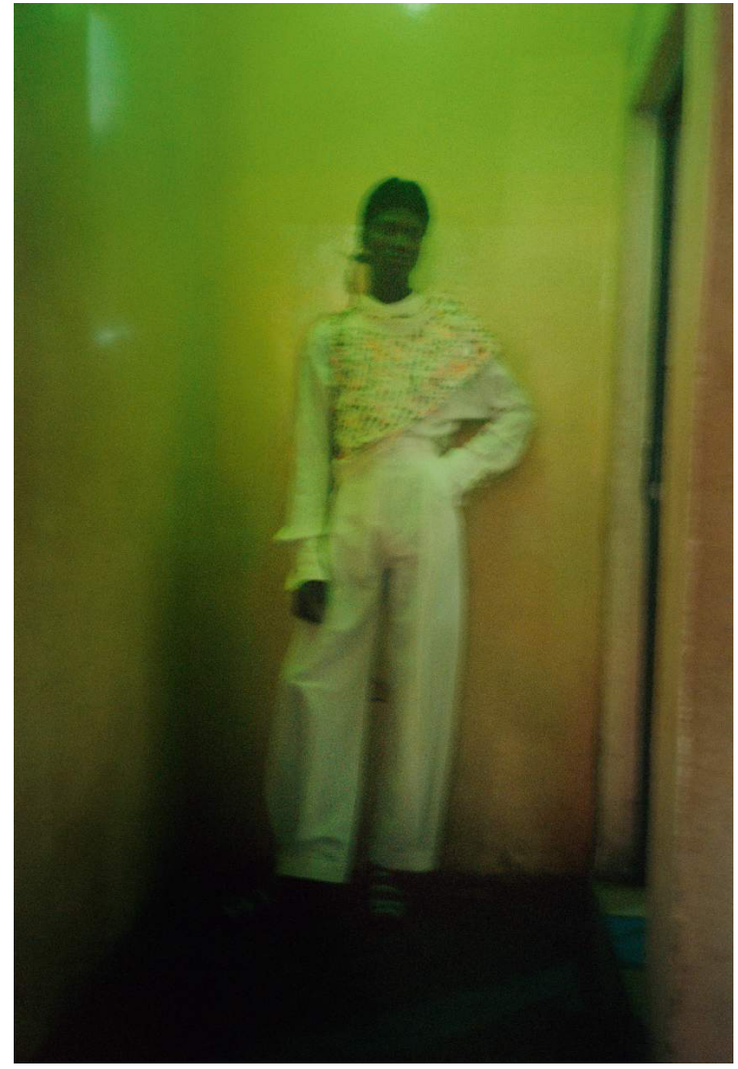
Rhenny wears black cut-out dress by Fruche
and shoes by Far Shoes.
Anthonia wears white dress and silk scarf by Fruche,
and shoes by Roger Viver. Tights stylist's own.

Anthonia wears top, skirt and dress by Lisa Folawiyo Studios.
Rhenny wears a knitted top by Tim Ryan Knit
and dress by Lisa Folawiyo Studios.



Rhenny wears crop top by Banke Kuku
and shirt dress by Orange Culture.

Models: Anthonia at the Claw Models, Precious Peter at Sage Models, Rhenny at 90s Models, Mohammed at the Claw Models, Ebuka at Cias Models, Peter at Ethos Models. Make-up: Lauretta Orji. Hair: Kehinde Are. Casting: Jonathan Johnson. Styling assistant: Laura Osare. Make-up assistant: Ifeoma Kalu. Hair assistant: Adebisi Sherifat. Production: Generation X. Producer: Gina Amanna. Assistant producer: Ayeblue Gbenga.

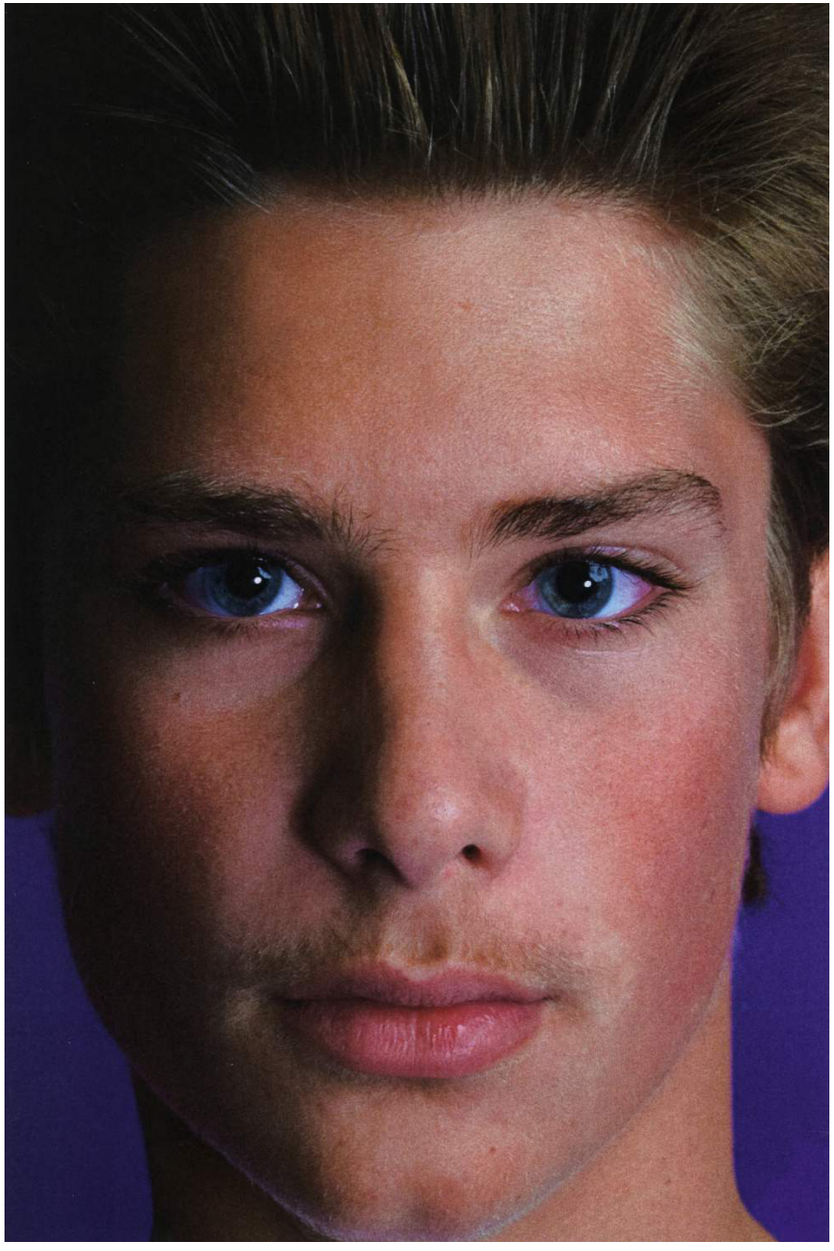


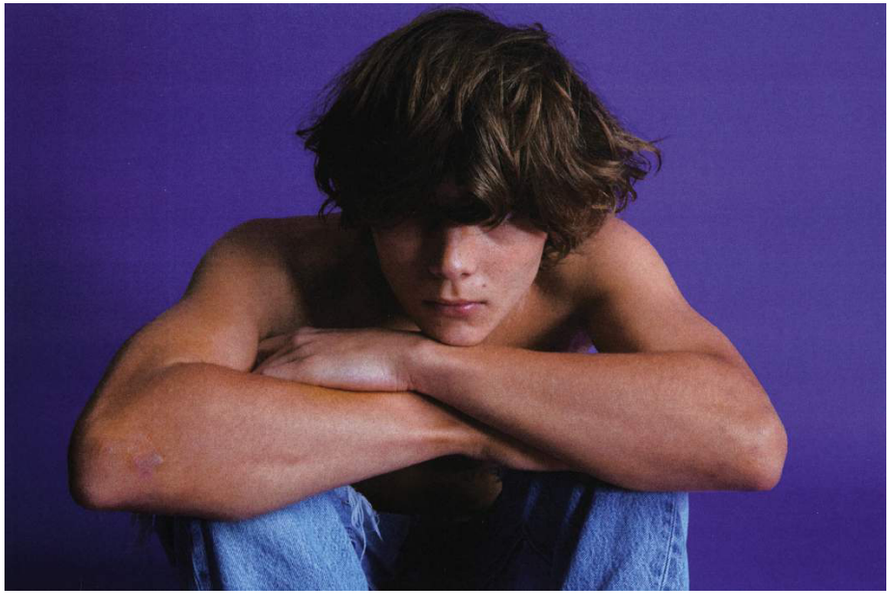
Ebuka wears shirt and trousers from WED Studio
and knitted jumper from Tim Ryan Knit.

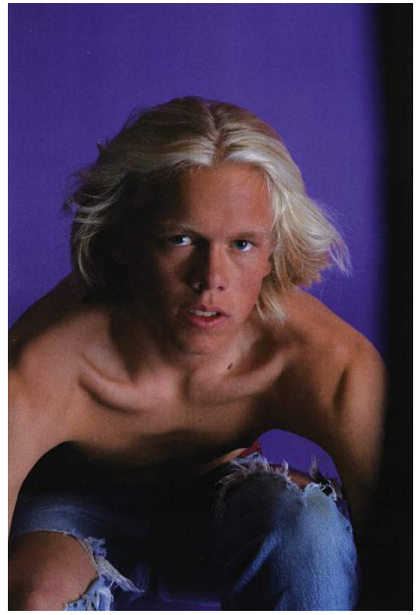
‘It’s *post*-post-modernism.’

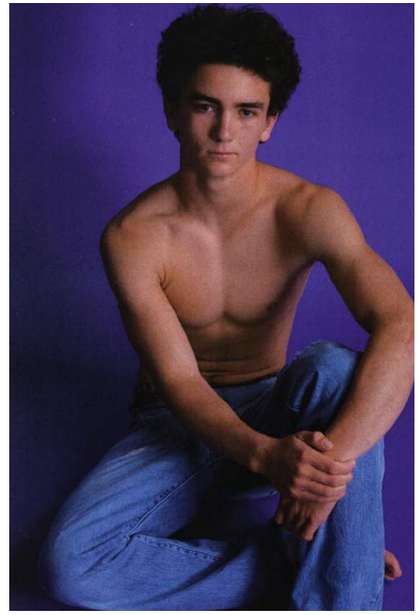
For Venice Beach native Eli Russell Linnetz, fashion is an unretouched snapshot of 1970s-tinged ‘dude culture’.

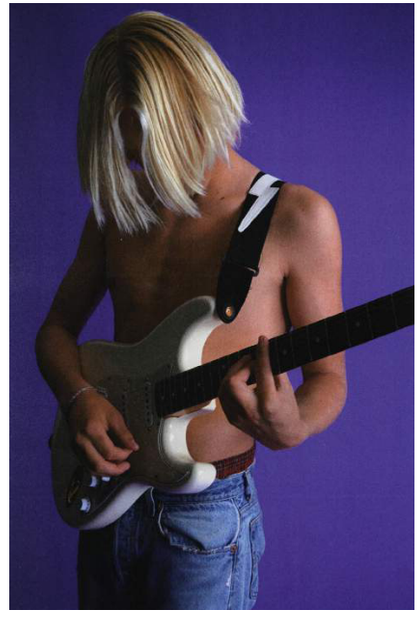
Interview by Andrew Bolton
Photographs by Eli Russell Linnetz

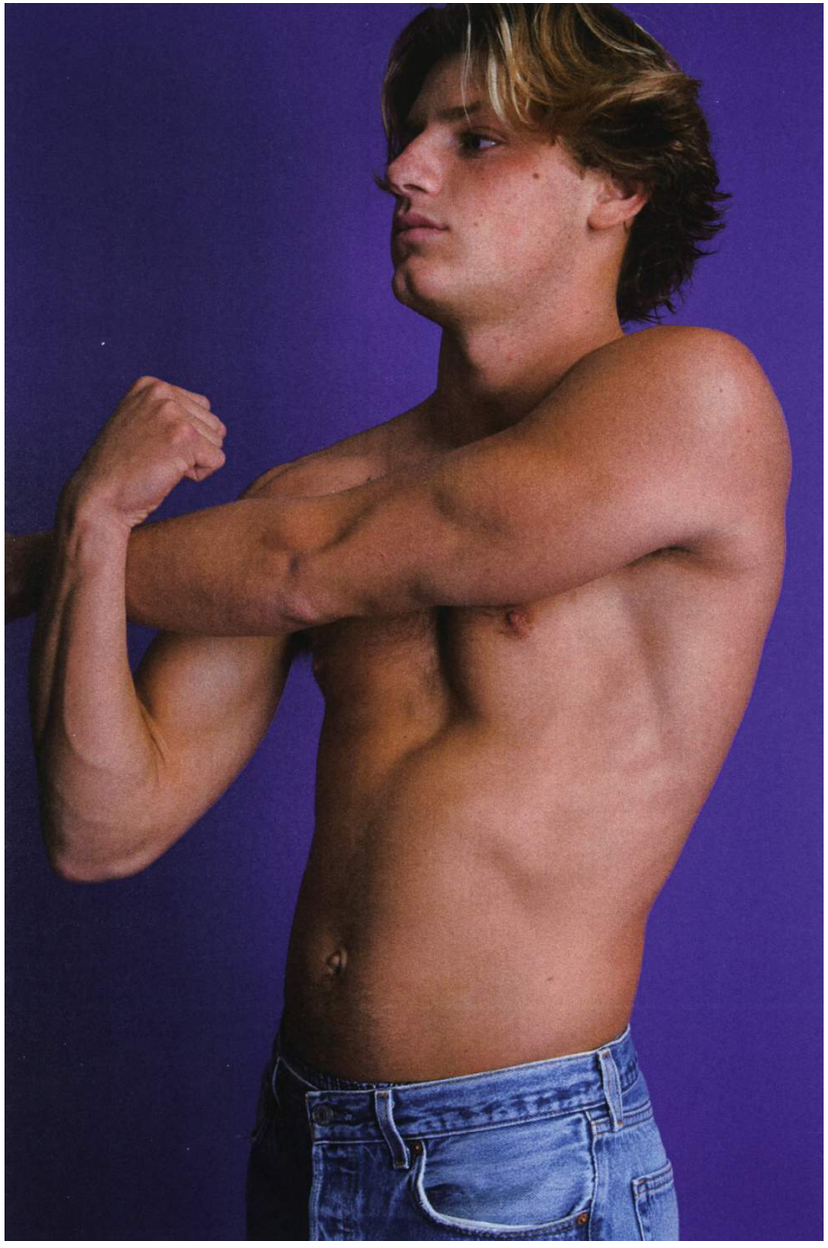


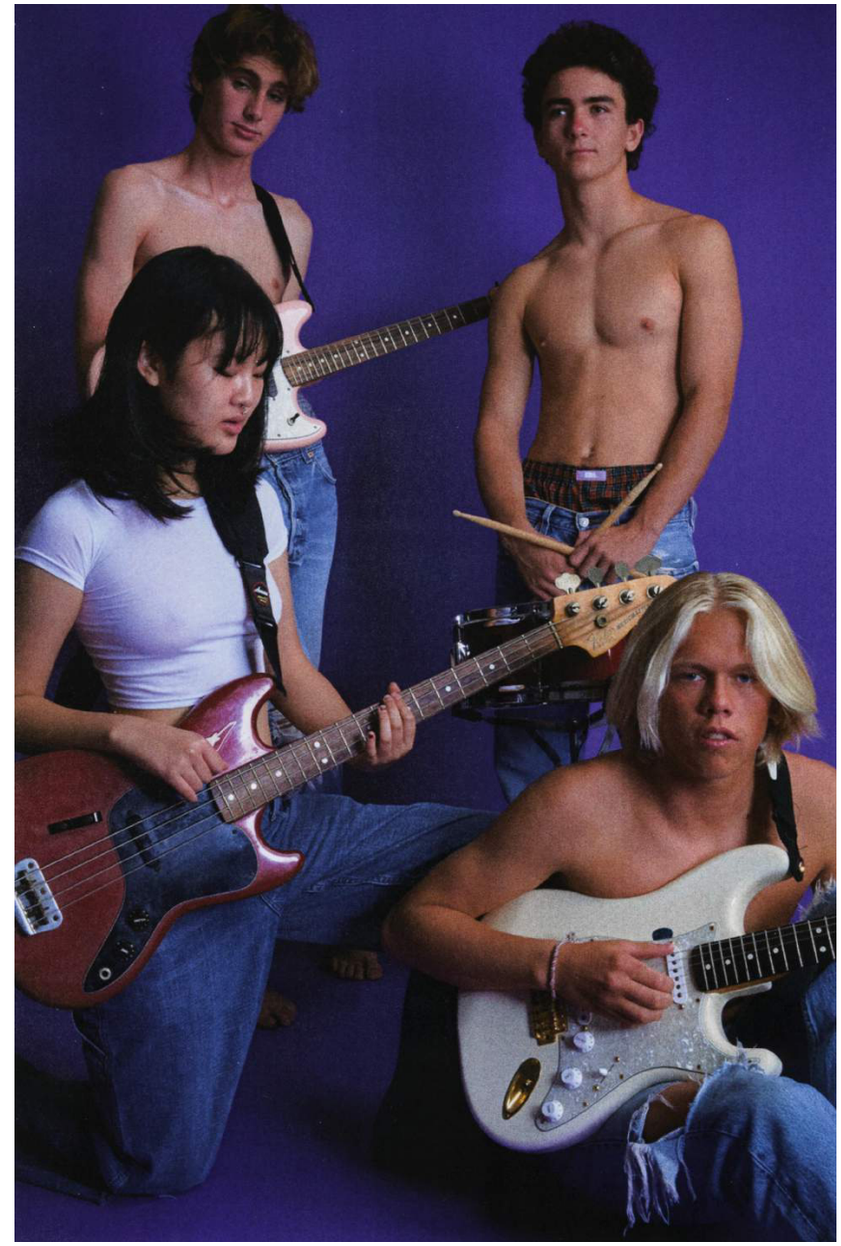


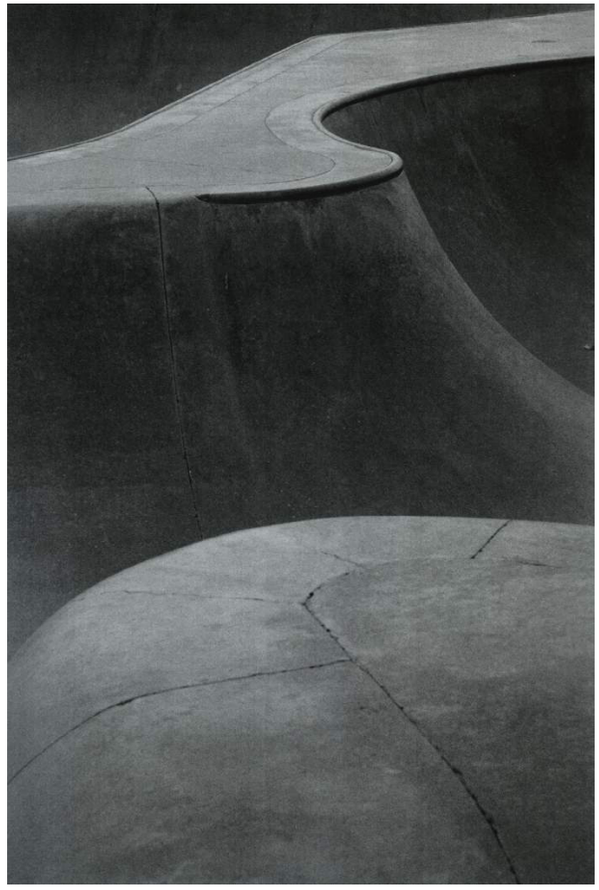


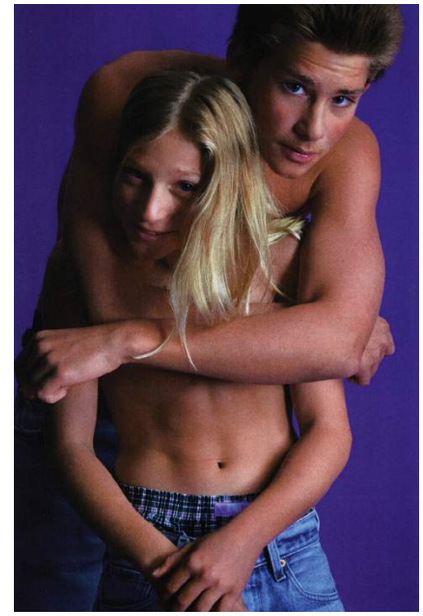


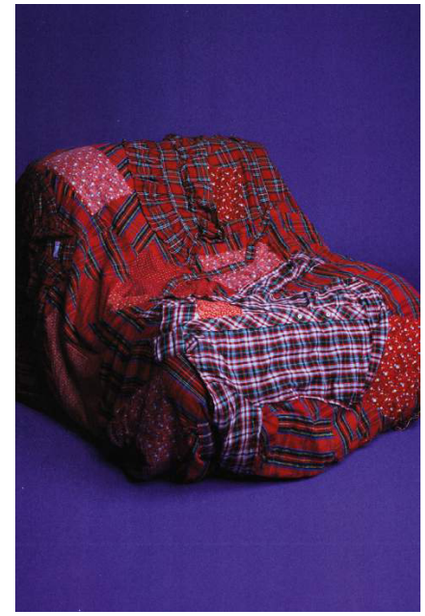


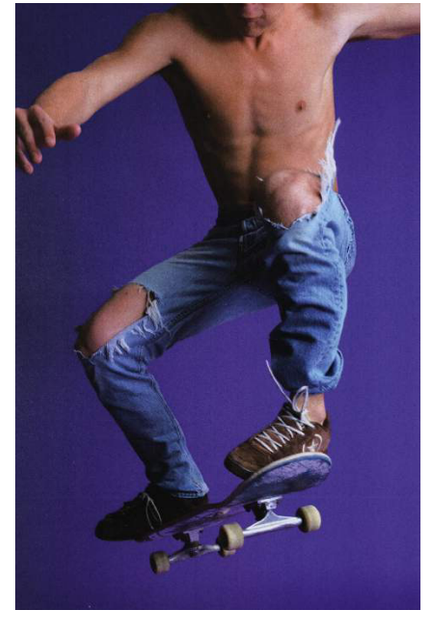


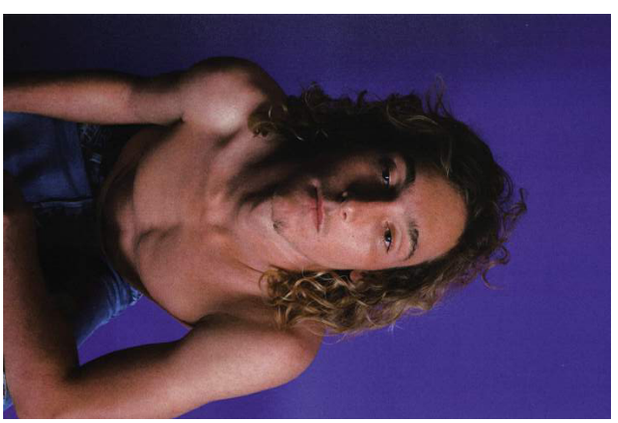












Production and casting: ERL Studios. Post-production: Michael Moser.

In America: A Lexicon of Fashion, the current exhibition at the Met's Costume Institute in New York, is an ambitious overview of American fashion, from Claire McCardell to Marc Jacobs to Heron Preston. Among the vitrines devoted to the grand, defining designers of the past eight decades, stands an outfit by Eli Russell Linnetz, or ERL, the 30-year-old designer, photographer, and multitalented creative.

Deeply rooted in his native Venice Beach, Linnetz creates work that evokes an off-kilter fever dream of 1970/80s America, as captured through an unretouched, Polaroid haze that makes real his otherworldly tapestry of influences. It's a distinctive vision – tapping into a collective unconscious born of Hollywood, optimistic visions of space travel, and classic sporty Americana – that becomes a vivid tribute to 20th-century US soft power, mapped onto a bold, yet flawed view of masculinity (less Bruce Weber or *Men's Health*, more Sean Penn's loveable stoner character Jeff Spicoli in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*).

The story of Linnetz's career is as oneiric as his work: a child actor on the red carpet aged 10, he was working for David Mamet at 15, before beginning a bewildering string of collaborations, directing music videos for Kanye West, designing stage sets for Lady Gaga, producing music for Kid Cudi, and writing songs for Teyana Taylor. When his work caught the eye of Rei Kawakubo and Adrian Joffe, who were in Los Angeles to launch Dover Street Market, Linnetz began working with Comme des Garçons, launched his ERL label, and entered the fashion world. Based in his Venice Beach studio, Linnetz is a kind of fashion *auteur*: he designs the clothes, does his own styling, runs his own casting, and takes his own photographs. In conversation with Andrew Bolton, the celebrated Wendy Yu Curator in Charge of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the mind behind *In America*, Linnetz talks sweat, innocence, authenticity, and sending a thrift-store quilt to the Met Gala.

Andrew Bolton: When I was working on the *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* exhibition, people kept asking, 'What is American fashion?' And it was so hard for me to answer that because what they expected was a very reduced, essentializing definition. There are 100 ensembles in the show and each one defines American fashion, so there are 100 definitions in the exhibition. If someone asked you that question, how would you respond?

Eli Russell Linnetz: I feel like the answer is 'nothing'. Even personally, I was never trained as a designer; I studied screenwriting and opera in college. I don't even think of myself as a designer per se, but rather as an artist almost desperately floating through the world, grasping at things around me. It is not really my job; I am just presenting what I am attracted to, very much like a curator. It's almost weird that I have fallen into this. I feel like I am in the *Manchurian Candidate*, like in the morning someone calls me and says a code word and then I design those clothes every day.

Andrew: People always call you the 'multi-hyphenate' and I always think that somebody who is truly creative has different sorts of outlets. You've done fashion, art direction and photography, which represents a more contemporary take on what creativity is today.

Eli: I love going to archives and collecting things from around the world. I see myself as more of a researcher. I went to Michael Jackson's personal archive and they had all these amazing drawings and paintings that he had done throughout his life; they were so incredible. We only ever see a small glimpse of someone in their work and I feel like that with my clothing: I do so many things that the clothing is almost an afterthought. I work on it 15 hours a day, sure, but it feels like I am simply living my experience of the world.

Andrew: Tell me more about the things you worked on prior to designing.

Eli: I started out when I was 15, working on Broadway for David Mamet. I just sent a cold email and he was like, 'Come and show up on the set.' When I did, he was like, 'You're really smart; come back tomorrow.' So I started on Broadway and then I went to USC for courses in screenwriting and opera, and while I was working for David Mamet I started working for Kanye, so I made all these music videos. And then everyone was like, 'Will you direct my tour?' So I started doing tours for Kanye and Lady Gaga, and then people were like, 'Can you take photos?' Then fashion came, and from that I met Adrian [Joffe] and Rei Kawakubo who I know you have worked closely with. They really took a chance on me. That is what I admire: that relentless following of a vision. Every day you have a reason to quit doing something, but you keep doing it, over 50 years.

Andrew: What Rei and Adrian really do is seek out singular visions; they look for people who have these very particular approaches and views of the world, which you clearly do. I got to know your work a bit late – I think it's your third collection that's in the exhibition – but when I looked back I saw the consistency of your vision. Another thing that struck me is about the myth of American fashion being non-narrative-based, not about storytelling or character – you are a prime example of that not being the case. Have your experiences with screenwriting and photography had an impact on your approach to fashion? Is that your initial inroad into a collection?

Eli: I will not dress someone in something that I don't believe they would actually wear. Some of the commercial teams I have to interact with ask if I can show more of the pieces, but that makes me nauseous; I physically can't do it. I am so lucky to work with Adrian and Rei, because they support me whatever I decide. My whole team is just me and one assistant: I do all the casting, and every day I am either researching or out on the streets trying to cast people. I photograph all the collections myself, as well. From day one, before I design anything, I think about what those final photos will look like and work backwards from there, thinking of the storytelling and characters.

Andrew: Do you approach it more as a movie director? Is part of that due to growing up in Hollywood and Venice?

Eli: One million percent. I would call myself a director over a designer. Even when I do a stage for Gaga – I did her Vegas residency – I imagine myself as a director. Growing up, I used to have dinner at Steven Spielberg's house or have Shabbat there – it can't get more LA! I have been forced to do my own thing and be my own person. I see myself as archiving the world around me and the things I love. Like the quilt I made for A$AP Rocky at the Met Gala; people had such a hard time wrapping their head around the idea that I had found the front of the quilt. It actually belonged to this great-grandmother, but I couldn't track down who she was even though I researched for months to locate where the fabrics and the prints had come from.[1] Then the Met Gala happened and people were upset that I hadn't made the front of the quilt myself, but I was like, 'No, that's the amazing part!' People have such a specific idea of what fashion is, but I was just putting things from my world onto the red carpet. It's that clash and conversation that's so interesting to me.

Andrew: I read that you incorporated boxer shorts and your dad's bathrobes into the quilt. The front is the original quilt and the back is all the additions?

Eli: Yes. The front is this amazing bubble quilt that I bought for $25 from a thrift shop; I designed the back and found these amazing 'memory quilters' in Boston to make it. To begin with, we scanned the whole quilt and tried to make reproduction prints on dead-stock 1970s cotton, some of it sun-bleached, but halfway through that process, it just didn't feel real to me. There is this Martin Margiela approach to recreating things from thrift stores, but there is an authenticity to what I do and I felt it was unpretentious just to use the thing and say where I'd found it.

Andrew: You used the quilt as a metaphor for fashion and American fashion's different identities. Jesse Jackson has talked about how the quilt is a metaphor for the different experiences of America, and I felt that it was so clever to use its original form and add your own memories. In a way, it is a diary of two different people – the grandmother and you – that you put together in one garment. How do memory and autobiography come into your own collections?

Eli: I don't try and think too much about my past or my future. When I started my fashion line, I had worked with celebrities and giant musicians for so long, I was losing my grasp on reality. So I cleared up this space and I just sat there until I started filling it with things that I was collecting. Piece by piece I started building this story, almost building up a world from scratch, because the world I was leaving behind was too chaotic. Of course, now I have to interact with the same people I was trying to escape! I see myself as a collage artist. I really spend all my time researching; that is what I love to do – to discover forgotten things. I don't know if I'm brave enough to explore my own past, but I do love diving into archives and finding little companies that went defunct. My new obsession is this wedding-dress maker, Jessica McClintock.[2]

'I was never trained as a designer; I studied screenwriting and opera in college. I don't even think of myself as a fashion designer per se.'

'I imagine myself more as a director. Growing up, I used to have dinner and Shabbat at Steven Spielberg's house – it can't get more LA!'

I started researching and every single piece I loved said 'McClintock' and I became obsessed. She started in the 1970s; I believe she made Hillary Clinton's wedding dress.[3] I love going down these rabbit holes of Americana. I don't like exploring myself, but I love a rabbit hole.

Andrew: You do tend to gravitate towards a 1970s aesthetic. This may be completely unconscious, but when I began looking at your images, a German photographer called Peter Berlin…[4]

Eli: I love him. I have his book.

Andrew: When I look at some of your work, I see Peter Berlin because there is a fetishization of youth culture and the body, and an underlying homoerotic sense…

Eli: Did you stuff the mannequin's crotch at the exhibition?

Andrew: Yes, we did! That was so funny, because when the dresser first dressed it, I was like, 'I think we need something else here.' It went bigger and smaller, but then we got the right proportions.

Eli: Everyone was like, 'I love how the crotch was stuffed' – they really got that. That attention to detail was awesome.

Andrew: People talk about dude culture with your work and there is so much to unpack with your images: the sweat stains, the unwashed masculinity that you seem to be fetishizing. To me that speaks of self-discovery. There is both an innocence and experience in your images. It's the same tension Peter Berlin used to play around with – that age when you are experimenting with your body. Are these stereotypes of masculinity and particularly American masculinity in your consciousness when you construct the images?

Eli: It really is unconscious. When I do a collection, I research and research for months and obsessively think about the characters. Then for it to be successful, I just let it unfold by itself when we get on set. The casting is the most important thing. Someone can take a good photo, but if the casting isn't right, what does it mean? And if the casting is right but not in the right outfit… It is even harder if you have two people in the same shot – if you don't believe they can be together then the whole idea of the world is broken. I pick people who can tell the story and I don't do any retouching. I let them be themselves and it becomes this wild emotional dance between us where we are pushing and pulling about what they are wearing, and their trying to make sense of the shoot. We shoot for two weeks, every day, like filming a movie. I can take 20,000 photos for these look books and then I have to edit it down to like 50.

Andrew: They read as single-frame shots, and then come together. That is what's so great about it; each image has a really complex narrative to it. Like Spike Jonze's advert for MedMen with those dioramas that read as individual shots but put together become a story.[5] That is how your work comes together. I read somewhere that it took four years to find the guys cast for the spring collection, to get the specific look you wanted. Where did you find them?

Eli: I travel around, to Orange County, hanging out at the surf spots. A lot of these people are local kids I met or who went to Santa Monica high school, where I went to school, or they are just younger brothers of friends. It's very organic, but it's almost like hunting for gold because once I find someone, then I use them for years. You can't use someone from a modelling agency; there is something more powerful about these people who have so much natural self-confidence.

Andrew: You believe in them more, that is the end result. A model who is perfect in every way lacks authenticity, while you designing the clothes, doing the casting and styling yourself means there is an authenticity that comes across very powerfully. We believe in these characters because they are being themselves.

Eli: Going back to the sweat and stuff, all the people I use are athletes, surfers and wrestlers. We spend weeks doing this, so we are looking for these micro-expressions that communicate many things at once, including innocence and masculinity.

Andrew: It's like someone has worked out and then thrown the clothes on the floor and just put them back on the next day, so they are sweat-stained, filled with testosterone. 'Micro-expressions' is such a nice phrase – that's why your images have so much potency, individually and collectively. What I am hearing is that a lot of that process is spontaneous and organic.

Eli: It really is. I obsess about certain details, then just let the rest happen. Like, I wanted to sell the underwear pre-washed and the factories thought I was insane. What I am trying to do out here in Venice Beach is so far removed from the high-end production that fashion has become, from just trying to make things for money. Yet the second people start noticing you, they are like, 'Use our models from these big agencies.' Then they want you to make videos, but I will not do video content. I went to the extremes of filming – the worst was filming a McDonald's commercial in Shanghai. I have to create a place of control and when you film, there are so many elements that give people an opportunity to judge. What I am trying to do is pure expression, and I love the idea of just capturing a moment in time on a single frame and letting people read into it. I don't feel the need to explain everything.

Andrew: It's an old-fashioned approach, but as a result there is an authenticity and purity to it that makes it compelling. It makes me think of the film *I Am Love* where the house was the main character – how much is Venice Beach a character in your storytelling and work?

Eli: I don't really have any rules other than to ask myself at the end of designing everything, 'What does this say about Venice or skating or surfing?' My fantasies are so limitless that I feel like people need something to hold on to. It has gotten so crazy because I have the sunscreen fragrance, suiting, men's, kid's, women's lines – I'm only on my third collection and we are doing 300 styles! But I make sure Venice Beach is in every garment.

Andrew: I love the way you have created a vocabulary and continue to keep refining it, like Azzedine [Alaïa] or Rick Owens. You do it in a different way: they return to design motifs; you return to characters and to a place. That is a very different way of looking at design.

Eli: When you are trying to express yourself, you have to pull from the things you know and use the tools in your tool box. Their background is fashion; they had textiles, stitching, knitting, so those are their tools. For me, even as a photographer, the subject is the tool I have to tell the story. That is why I started to do clothes, because I was so tired of doing these big-budget shoots and people forcing these clothes on me that I hated. I wanted to tell my own story of the world and where I come from, but I hadn't planned what I wanted to say. I just let that form on its own. My connection to the people is what tells the story.

Andrew: You started off very unself-consciously and organically. Now you are successful, do you feel a pressure to overthink things? Is the process less organic now than when you began?

Eli: I let that enter my mind for five minutes every few months, and then I remind myself to go back to my bubble and do what I want. People will always want to take and take, so at the end of the day it is about staying true to my process. In my head, I am like, 'Do I need to reinvent myself every season?' It's kind of comforting that some of the most successful people are just obsessed with grey suiting or single silhouettes, and their art is exploring the hell out of that one thing that is locked in their brain.

Andrew: Your shows have so much creativity. It might be easier to change every season, but if you adopt a position and then constantly refine and dig deeper into it, it is more challenging as a creator. The rewards will be greater, and you will always be associated with it. It's the same with Chanel: she has remained all this time because she had a singular vision that's as modern now as it was 90 years ago.

Eli: The challenge of working today is that everyone is a curator on Instagram. There are so many people creating every day, which is cool – it's like a renaissance, everyone can do it – but it really makes you think, 'What's my path? My story? What do I really believe in, in the world?' When you are suddenly faced with dressing people on the red carpet, outside of your little bubble, what does this say? Which is why that A$AP Rocky moment felt so authentic, because I really feel that spoke to a lot of the stuff I do in my everyday work. It wasn't like, 'Just make something for this person.' We are challenged every day to be a new person or reinvent ourselves, and there is an intense bravery in that. I don't want to compare myself to Rei Kawakubo, but I just admire her work ethic and her practice. Sometimes I feel like, 'I am going to stick to this one thing and if it kills me then that is the sacrifice I will have made to fully explore this thing and to go where no man or woman or mouse has gone before.' Every day there is a desire to say I am not that person; I can be other things. Then it takes self-restraint to explore this one story. It's about finding the nuance and little twists. Like wringing out a rag or making bone broth. Like, how do I pull all of this out of this one thing?

Andrew: I am interested in how you are going to evolve your characters. I love archetypes – I know they are dangerous

'People talk about dude culture with your work. There's so much to unpack: the sweat stains, the unwashed masculinity that you seem to fetishize.'

'What I'm trying to do out here in Venice Beach is so far removed from the high-end production that fashion has become – just making things for money.'

but I love them – because they never age, and I wonder with your characters, the surfer and the jock, how are they going to evolve? To me, they are eternally youthful. How do you see them aging?

Eli: I spent years finding these people. You know, I do castings every week, and it is so hard to find the innocence in someone's eyes and the authenticity that will translate into the photos that once I find someone I feel like I am with them for life. However they evolve, I am going to change with them. I surround myself with so few people and everyone in my life is so important to me that I feel that if I am letting someone into the ERL world, it is because I really believe in them and they really speak to the vision or the story that I am trying to tell. All these people are like my family and they come back every season. In the last collection, *The American Tale*, the brothers in the suits are from an amazing religious family; they are like surfers from Hawaii. They had such a purity and honesty about them. Hopefully I'll be able to shoot them again next season. If you enter something with honesty, morality and authenticity, I feel like the people who are supposed to be in your life will come.

Andrew: This sounds like your own personal manifesto and value system, which you convey through this art form that just happens to be fashion. I think that is what people are seduced by when they see these images. It is more than just the beauty of the image and the flawed perfection of the casting and the sweat-stained body odour of the clothes. It is a realness that comes through so powerfully in your work. The *In America* exhibition is all about trying to establish a new vocabulary of American fashion based on emotions and the expressive qualities of fashion, and for your particular piece I used the word 'camaraderie' because of the stereotypes that you play with. Camaraderie is defined as the 'spirit of friendly familiarity and goodwill that exists between comrades'. I just wanted to know what you thought about that word and if you would use it to describe that piece.

Eli: So many people said they loved how you used that word because it feels so true for that piece. So, thank you. I feel that there is a friendship and a family quality to the characters. If I had to pick a word myself, you know, I would probably say 'mischievous'. I feel like mischievous is fun, always with a sense of playfulness and humour, even if it can be a little sinister. I don't like it when things are purely ironic, you know.

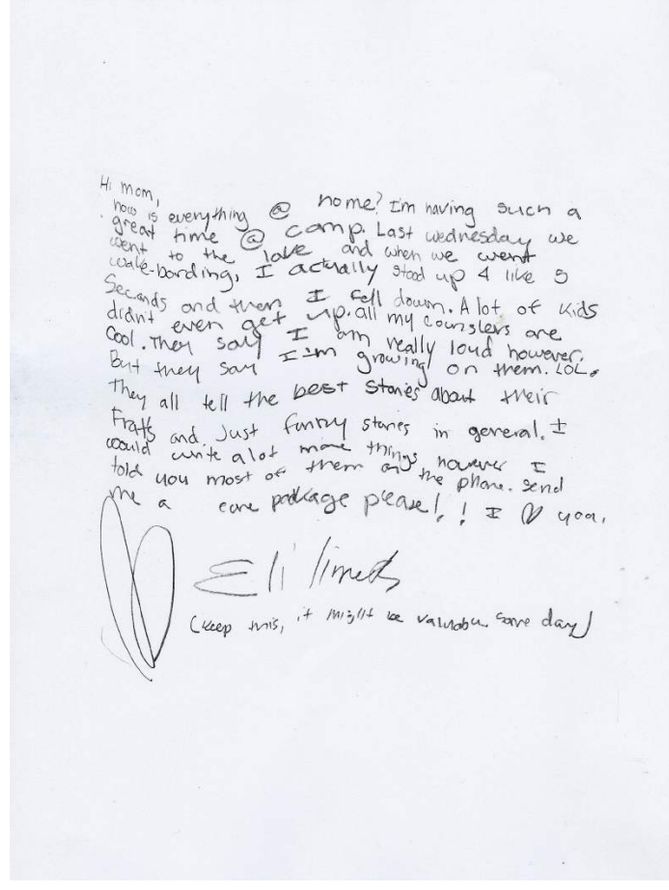
Andrew: 'Mischievous' is a good word. As a kid, I loved movies like *Animal House*, and when I look at your images, I am always reminded of those really fun movies: Cheech & Chong, but with a Sofia Coppola-esque fetishization of teenage culture.

Eli: There was an article that said, 'Where was ERL when *Virgin Suicides* was made?'[6]

Andrew: It's like Sofia Coppola, Peter Berlin and *The Breakfast Club* all merged into one thing – the uniqueness of your vision is ultimately what is so compelling.

Eli: Thank you. I think it is the connecting of elements on an artistic basis, a collage. It is an irreverent co-bashing of things that just don't go together in an unforgiving way, yet done with a respect for all these things. It's *post*-postmodernism.

Andrew: I am the biggest fan of postmodernism, eclecticism, historicism and pastiche. There are very few designers who do it well – John Galliano does – but to do it with a sort of aesthetic vision that is completely one's own, that is post-postmodernism. It's about gathering all these influences that are personal to you and reconfiguring them into your own singular vision. It is a very rare talent.



1. After the Met Gala, the quilt worn by A$AP Rocky was identified by Instagram user @books_n_babies as having been made by her great-grandmother. Under a photograph of the quilt at the Met and another of it on a bed, she wrote: 'Looks like great grandma Mary went to the #metgala with @asaprocky.'

2. Jessica McClintock's design career began in 1969 producing bridalwear under the name Gunnes Sax. Her wedding and prom dresses – both modestly priced and widely available in department stores across the United States – became wildly successful. Her fashion and design company, which later changed its name to Jessica McClintock, produced a wide range of objects, from eyewear to fragrance to light fixtures and bedding, and had annual sales of over $140 million by the 1990s. Jessica McClintock retired in 2013 and died of congestive heart failure in March 2021; she was 90.

3. Hillary Rodham Clinton bought her Jessica McClintock wedding dress at a Dillard's department store in Fayetteville, Arkansas, the night before her wedding to Bill Clinton on October 11, 1975. 'I saw this dress and fell in love with it,' she said later. 'It was kind of hippie Victorian, I loved the whole look of it.' The gown cost the bride-to-be $53, the equivalent of $259 in 2020 US dollars.

4. Described as the 'first "photosexual"' by *Aperture* magazine, German-born photographer and artist Peter Berlin – born Armin Hagen Freiherr von Hoyningen-Huene – moved to San Francisco in the early 1970s where he dedicated his life to sexual pleasure. He also began making hardcore gay porn films and taking black-and-white photography whose iconography was influential on artists including Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe and Tom of Finland. 'When I look back,' he told *Apartamento* magazine in 2018, 'my intent wasn't to be some iconic symbol; the only thing I wanted was to get laid.'

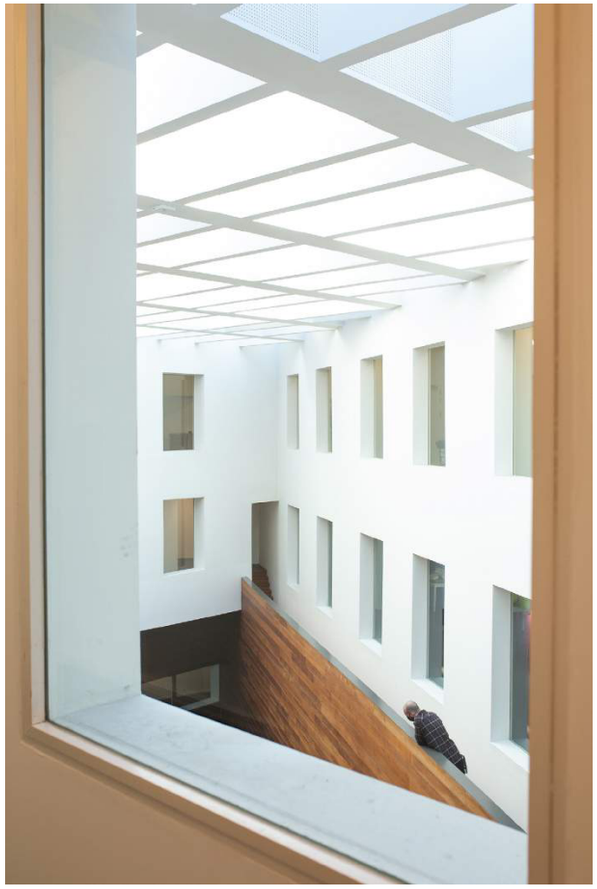
5. Directed by Spike Jonze in 2019, the 'New Normal' advertisement for cannabis dispensary chain MedMen is a two-minute journey through a series of diorama tableaux highlighting the history of cannabis in the United States.

6. The article, 'Where Was ERL When Sofia Coppola Filmed "The Virgin Suicides"?', was published in August 2021 on highsnobiety.com.

‘They are trained like artists more than fashion designers.’

From Van Gogh to Gvasalia, Antwerp’s Royal Academy of Fine Arts continues to nurture fine artists.

Interview by Jorinde Croese
Portraits and collection photography by Ronald Stoops
Reportage photography by Catherine Smet



Back in 1663, Flemish artist David Teniers the Younger tried to persuade the Spanish king to start an arts academy in Antwerp inspired by Italian and French contemporaries, saying that it would bring forward 'good and great artists'. The pleading worked; David got his academy and kept his promise (the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp's alumni include Vincent Van Gogh). Exactly 300 years later, the fourth-oldest arts academy in Europe added a fashion department, now most often associated with the Antwerp Six: Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs, Marina Yee, and Walter Van Beirendonck. Alongside Martin Margiela who graduated soon afterwards, these designers changed the way the world thought about Belgian fashion design with their maxi-minimalist, Japanese-influenced style. Later graduates such as Kris Van Assche, Haider Ackermann and Demna Gvasalia were also educated the Antwerp way, with a tight focus on creativity, storytelling and individuality, buttressed by the school's fine-arts tradition in which drawing classes are still key.

Walter Van Beirendonck has taught at the Academy since the 1980s and took over as head of the fashion department in 2008, while continuing to run his namesake brand. And whether it's his own work or his students', Van Beirendonck's ethos remains the same: unconstrained creativity.

***System* spoke to Walter Van Beirendonck about the ebbs and flows of his mentoring role and how he sees the future of both the Academy and creative education at large, before inviting five of today's fashion students to share their own thoughts and current collection work.**

The Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp was founded in 1663, but the fashion department wasn't created until 1963. What is its rapport with the school's older, fine-arts history?
Walter Van Beirendonck: What I've always liked here, even when I was a student myself, is that you can feel the history literally in the buildings, in this space where you are actually having your courses. Today we are in a separate building, but all the students go back to the original building for drawing lessons, and they are still connected with all the other disciplines. Something I always liked a lot is that during your break, you are in contact with sculptors or someone from jewellery; you see painters working and talking. It is a very nice synergy in the school itself, and you feel it is really an academy and not just a fashion department. That is what I always liked as a student and now as a teacher you have a feeling that you are part of all of the arts.

The fashion department is in a building that also houses the Belgian fashion museum, MoMu. That's a unique situation for the students who have access to such a great cultural and fashion resource.
It is, and after the recent reopening of the MoMu, there is now an archive with historical clothes that the students can look at, and an incredible library of books and videos. It is a place where they can really spend time and get to know the past. I think that's fantastic.

Speaking of recent history, the Antwerp Six designers regularly come to mind when people think about the Academy. Do students come to the school anticipating a particular aesthetic or approach to design that's associated with that history?
I don't know if it's exactly associated with that history, but they do come to be raised in a certain way. It's for the way that we work with them, which is a very one-on-one style of teaching. They know they have the freedom really to develop their own signature and they can express themselves 100%. People are attracted to that kind of freedom. And again, back to the atmosphere of the school and the academy, they are trained like artists more than fashion designers, and I think a lot of people choose it for that aspect. Something that is still very important is storytelling – we really ask them to go deep into the research to tell their stories in a very personal way. Paired with the freedom, that is a bit of the vibe when you come to Antwerp.

I imagine this freedom works well as a framework for a lot of people, but I suppose some students might struggle without particular boundaries.
If they don't feel confident in this system then they can leave and go to another school or elsewhere. Some are perhaps not creative enough to meet that challenge because we are really demanding, so we get as much as possible out of their creativity. There is the problem of people dropping out during their studies; for some we perhaps ask too much.

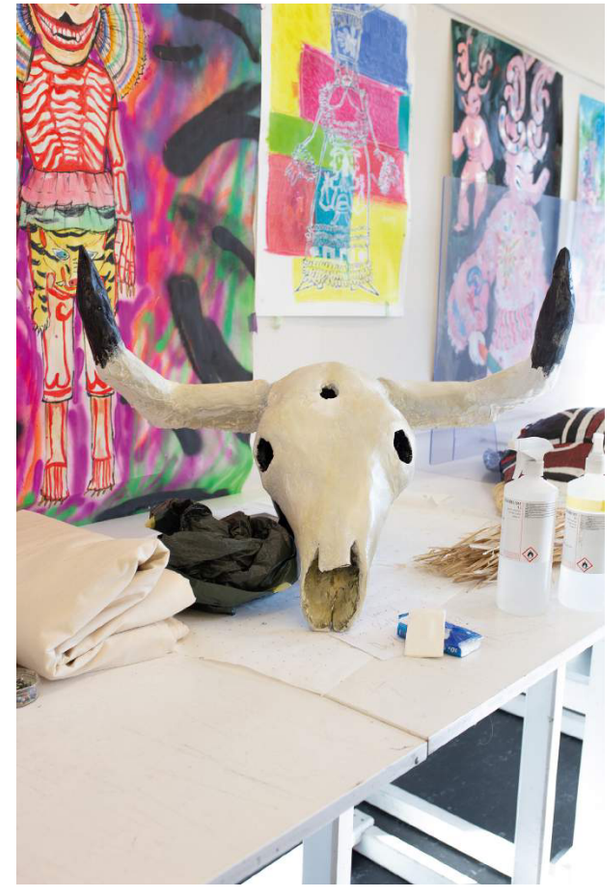
How do you measure the success of a student in Antwerp?
A student is always assessed with a complete team. During the presentations we really look at the graphic work, but also the garments, fittings, pictures – everything. Then the individual teacher assigned to guide each student really discusses his or her work; the whole team follows each student from year one to the master's.

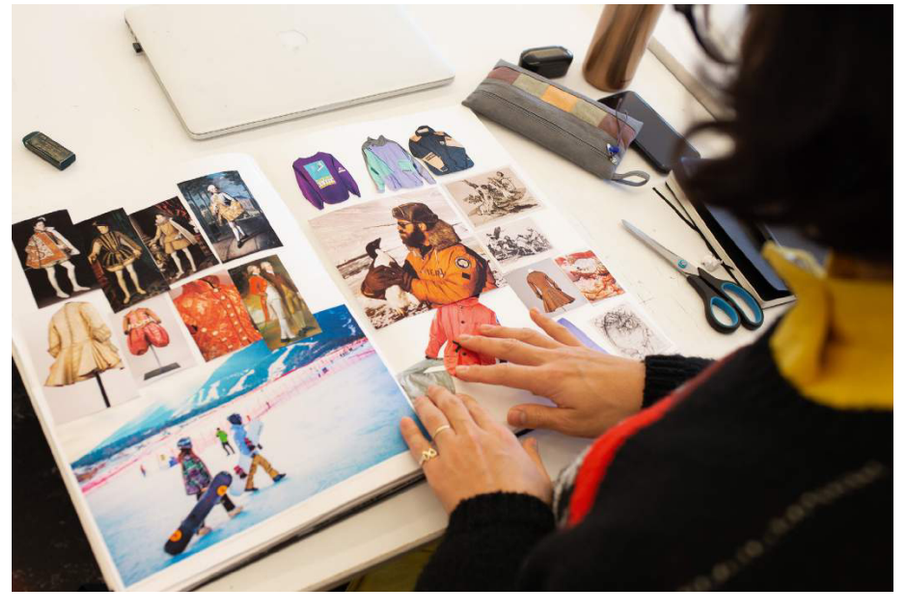
How many students are usually doing the master's degree?
Last year there were 20, which was actually a lot for us, but that had to do with the Covid situation; this year we have 10. Generally, between 10 and 20 is the normal number of students. We only very exceptionally accept people who haven't done our bachelor's course, and that is another reason why we don't have so many students.

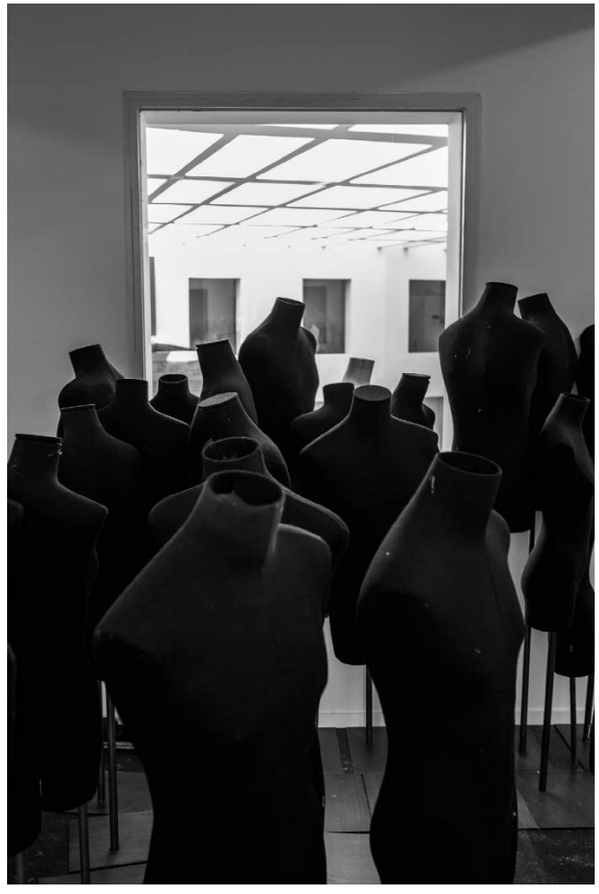
Is there a particular reason why you don't often accept outsiders?
We tried it a few times, but we always concluded that they were missing the way of working that you learn during the bachelor's here. It was very difficult for them to work at the same level, in the same way. You have to make a collection of 12 looks in a short period and it never really worked out.

How many people are there usually in the third year before the master's?
Last year we had 23 students; this year I have 30 students in the third year. Ten years ago, a student would do four years, but now they do years one to three and then go do *stages* [internships], before coming back after a year or two. The way people are studying today is completely different.

'Fifteen years ago, the students' ambition was mainly to start up their own businesses; today it is really to go and work for one of the big houses.'







Industry experience is such an important thing, taking it from education into the 'real' world. Do you find that the students are quite tuned in about how to get into the industry? Does the school guide them at all or are they expected to do their own research?
We don't really guide them with this because we don't require internships. They can do it on their own; they get the school's authorization and the insurance and all those things. We do not search for them, but we do invite headhunters at the end of the school year, so different companies come from all over the world and organize contacts with designers or houses who might be interested, and then they just go for it.

Do you find that most of your students want to go to Paris or is it pretty international?
Many to Paris, but also London and New York. Their ambition today is really to work for the big houses, that is also very obvious. Fifteen years ago, their ambition was mainly to start up their own business and then to think about their own collection, but today they are much more rational and they want to go and work for someone.

You've been here for 36 years and head of the fashion department for 15.
It's been a very long time! I started teaching here in 1985. I came back to teach four years after graduating, just to see if I liked it or not, and then I stayed until now.

What is the one thing that has changed the most in that time?
If you look at it from 1985 to now, the world has changed drastically, of course, and what has changed the most is communication and the way we look at the world. It's the technology, all these things that are now normal and that we use all the time.

Have you incorporated new technologies at the Academy in a way that benefits your specific teaching process?
If you look at the way we are working, it is exactly how we worked long ago – the same sewing machines and the same tables. We've carried on the traditional way in some ways because we've never had the budget to bring in all this technology. We tried to balance that with the way we teach. It would be fantastic to have good knitting machines and digital printing machines and incredible machines to make patterns, but it never happened, so we had to just move on. I think we don't really miss it. The only computers we have are for digital image work and that's it.

What is your vision of the Academy's future? Is there anything you would still like to achieve?
You know this is my last school year?

I didn't!
I am turning 65 next year, which here means you have to stop in education.

Is that a legal requirement?
Yes, because the Academy is a public school and everybody working in the public sector has to stop at 65.

Would you continue if possible?
I would not even think about it, because it is not possible. I hope that the school will be able to carry on in the same direction we have been working in for a long time now. And that we can keep on bringing this idea of creativity into the fashion world. I believe in it – it is an important part of the fashion world, so I hope that the school can continue that way in the future.

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YOU
WELL

‘My collection is based on my long-lost, imaginary childhood friend Elizete. She went to live her life by the lake with new friends and she faded away from my memory, just as I faded from hers.’

Alise Anna Dzirniece

Alise Anna Dzirniece, 25

Tell us about your collection.
My collection is based on my long-lost, imaginary childhood friend Elizete. She went to live her life by the lake with new friends and faded away from my memory, just as I faded from hers. I usually start by creating a character to build on, and with this collection I was trying to reimagine her through my childhood stories and by repeating activities I used to do. In the collection, the wearer can play with each garment and wear it in many different ways. So whoever feels like wearing it can wear it. It makes me so happy to see my clothes giving the wearer joy.

What’s the best thing about the Academy?
My friends – the people I have met here and the friendships I have made are something I will cherish forever. From an academic perspective, we are pushed a lot here and we work in many different mediums, which motivates our creativity.

Which person in fashion do you most admire, and why?
There are lots; it is hard to choose only one! I absolutely love Elsa Schiaparelli’s irony and details; I always seem to revisit her work. If I really, really had to select one person from fashion it would be Rei Kawakubo. I have never met her in person, but I admire her work and how playful it is. Her studio seems like one big playground and it’s amazing how she and her team keep that playfulness alive each season. I wish I could touch the garments and see the construction process or even just the design process; there is a lot to learn from her.

What can younger designers express through fashion that designers from an older generation cannot?
Perhaps us younger designers – even if I’m not sure I can really call myself a designer yet – might still have a certain naivety to our work, which might be less limiting. Whenever I talk to my friends and classmates, the subject of sustainability seems always to come up, which is good. For young designers sustainability in fashion is a normal part of our working process. Even though sometimes it doesn’t work out, we are more conscious of it and understand the impact of our work. Also, we haven’t yet been crushed by the business aspect, which puts fewer brakes in our minds perhaps.

Finally, where do you see yourself professionally in five years’ time?
That’s a good question! It’s hard to tell, especially as these last two years have made a big hole in my plans or even the idea of them. I’m almost even slightly afraid to make plans so that I won’t end up disappointed. Unfortunately, I definitely won’t be going back to my home country of Latvia as I don’t see many opportunities there, and it has shown little or no interest in supporting artists and designers working in fashion. So I see myself working somewhere else in Europe, or maybe even somewhere else on the other side of the world. I would definitely want to be part of a team with the same vision. There are fashion houses where I feel I could fit in and add my creative input or where I could grow with the house.

‘I’m a big fan of jarring choices, mixing colours and sensations that can appear uncool or unfashionable, borderline cartoony and at times, immature.’

Amir Torres Darwich

Amir Torres Darwich, 25

Tell us about your collection.
It was mainly about two obsessions I had at the time (and still do): abstract artists’ freedom to experiment and furries, those anthropomorphic raving neon wolves. I wanted to make a constructive collection that was as sharp as it was soft. I am also a big fan of jarring choices, mixing colours and sensations that can appear uncool or unfashionable, borderline cartoony and at times, immature. I always envision my things being worn by people with a sense of wonder and curiosity, people who allow themselves to have fun and don’t take themselves too seriously.

What’s the best thing about the Academy?
The artistic freedom to experiment I’ve had throughout my time here. I have really found my place aesthetically in the school; it has pushed me to explore my artistic identity and realize what I can offer not only in fashion but in other visual arts. My design process usually involves a lot of illustrations and paintings, and I feel that my artistic approach wouldn’t have had a place, academically speaking, or it wouldn’t have been received the same way elsewhere. I am not sure if my work is serious enough to be considered art, but the fashion department has always made me feel appreciated for what I can and could potentially create.

Which person in fashion do you most admire, and why?
I am the kind of person who can never answer ‘my favourite something’ questions because I truly love everything and everyone. I guess for this question I will fall back, as always, on Alexander McQueen. In each and every one of his collections there is always more and more to uncover; each piece has details that are just beyond clever and obsessive. He was also an incredibly proficient storyteller – and fashion is a very hard medium with which to tell complex narratives. It takes someone with incredible artistic prowess to tell all these stories through garments in a non-convoluted way, while always keeping such a high level of innovation and sensitivity.

What can younger designers express through fashion that designers from an older generation cannot?
Kindness. It will sound extremely idealistic, but I think it is time to break the cycle of violence and labour abuse. Why do we need to have such hostile environments full of hostile personalities just repeating what was done to them? Fashion in our era can express that it’s cool to be kind and sweet, and to care about others, that it is cool if we all uplift each other, and teach each other new things, whether with a classmate, a coworker, or people working for you. It’s time to drop the unnecessary facades of cynicism and passive contempt. A kind and collaborative environment can eventually create an industry that is more prepared to genuinely confront bigger changes in proactive ways. How can a system that is plagued with uncooperativeness, exploitation and unkindness ever pretend to be able to tackle bigger issues?

Finally, where do you see yourself professionally in five years’ time?
I still want to be creating; I honestly don’t see a future where I am not making something, whether it’s illustration, painting, sculpture or fashion. In my creative practice I hope that I can work with the friends I have made here and my friends from Mexico. Also, who knows, maybe not in five years but eventually I hope someone can feel there is a space for my work in the creative industries. I also currently love the idea of teaching, sharing knowledge, and helping others to channel their creativity, so I hope there is some of that in my future.

‘I was inspired by motels, and romanticized the kind of relationships or interactions that can happen in spaces like those. What I imagined was a love affair between two different worlds, one serious, masculine and corporate, and the other feminine, sexy and free.’

Natalia Saavedra

Natalia Saavedra, 24

Tell us about your collection.
I am always inspired by kitsch and the everyday things that surround us. Many are considered as being strange or in bad taste, but I always try to bring out the beautiful side. In this collection I was inspired by motels and romanticized the kind of relationships or interactions that can happen in spaces like those. What I imagined was a love affair between two different worlds, one serious, masculine and corporate, and the other feminine, sexy and free.

What’s the best thing about the Academy?
What I like most is the work system we have. We usually work on one main project and everything we do in the different classes is focused on that. Teachers give you feedback all the time about what you are working on by yourself and help you push your project to its fullest potential. The other best thing is that you are surrounded by a diverse group of really talented people, which makes everything more motivating and inspiring.

Which person in fashion do you most admire, and why?
I have many people on my list, but if I have to say a single name it would be Demna Gvasalia, although nowadays that seems like a cliché. I identify with him and with his aesthetics because in Mexico, where I come from, we always see the beautiful within the ugly, just as I believe Demna does with his own world. In Mexico, not all streets and neighbourhoods are beautiful, but we always find their unique charm. Having grown up in such a chaotic environment where not everything works as it should – dirty streets, street markets, the Mexican subway – all of this brings a diversity of faces and styles that I find extremely inspiring and unexpected. Demna brought his everyday world into casting and in his fashion; I also aspire to do something similar and bring my own everyday world into a context of fashion.

What can younger designers express through fashion that designers from an older generation cannot?
Our generation is totally different and so is how we define what is fashion. We have more ethical responsibility than past generations; we are more aware and informed of what is happening around us and the message we communicate. As I’m communicating through my work it is my responsibility to be ethically consistent, while still expressing myself and having fun.

Where do you see yourself professionally in five years’ time?
Firstly, I would like to get a visa so I can stay in Europe to continue learning, collaborating and working with people here. There is a need for more Latino representation in the European fashion industry and I would love to be able to contribute and bring more diversity into the industry. I want to learn as much as I can here in the coming years and also see how, at a distance or in professional projects, I can contribute to change within the Mexican fashion industry.

‘When you study in Antwerp, the teachers create a bubble you stay in. It’s sensitive and fragile, but it allows you to explore as deeply as possible your identity and personality.’

Ching-Lin Chen

Ching-Lin Chen, 29

Tell us about your collection for your label ChingLin.
The concept stems from two texts about the different emotions around love and relationships that I transferred into the symbols of flowers and a vase. Flowers are the best love language; there is no need for words, you just hand them over and share your emotions. Their different states can be different symbols of love: dried equals sadness and fresh means happiness. I tried to use fabric and origami techniques to translate the softness and stiffness of flowers.

What’s the best thing about the Academy?
When you study in Antwerp, the teachers create a bubble you stay in. It’s sensitive and fragile, but it allows you to explore as deeply as possible your identity and personality. Inside, you are, of course, allowed to make mistakes.

Which person in fashion do you most admire, and why?
I really admire Walter Van Beirendonck, with his multiple identities. He’s a successful and legendary designer, and continues surpassing himself to bring out his fantasy world to audiences. He’s also a teacher, who is still patient and listens to students’ stories and the concepts behind their collections, and gives us useful suggestions that push us forward at the right time.

What can younger designers express through fashion that designers from an older generation cannot?
We appreciate how the older generation of designers has created classics and a fashion community with sufficient resources for us. Simultaneously, though, as young designers, we dare to take risks to deconstruct and reconstruct the world.

Finally, where do you see yourself professionally in five years’ time?
I hope that I will still have the innocent heart of a child to observe the world with my short height and small eyes.

‘I love the dynamic atmosphere of constantly being within a process. Much of it is thanks to our teachers – they challenge us by pushing us to a point we would never go to by ourselves.’

Domi Grzybek

Domi Grzybek, 34

Tell us about your collection.
It was a personal journey into my ancestors’ stories. I took the time to face the past, and then look deeper. What in the past could be a trigger to the events that happened later? I was influenced by Mark Wolynn’s theory on how we pass trauma down through generations. There is something poetic and magical in the way we are bonded together and at the same time we try to disconnect from it. I started by focusing on the women in my family, but as it progressed I started looking at places where there was a strong bond between women, and where wearing similar clothes showed a certain group unity and power.

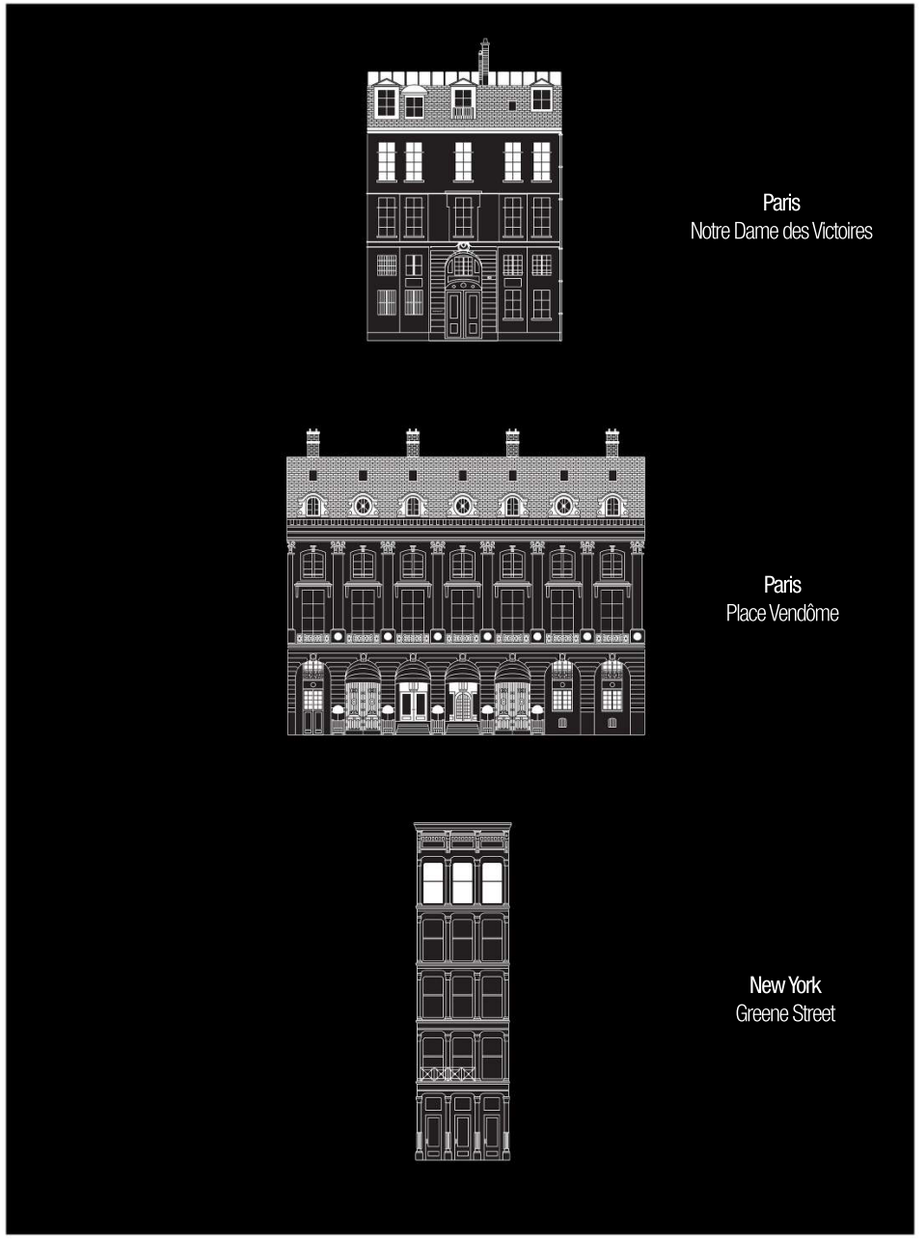
What’s the best thing about the Academy?
I love the dynamic atmosphere of constantly being within a process. Much of it is thanks to our teachers – they challenge us by pushing us to a point we would never go to by ourselves. They guide us to dive into observations and encourage a sensitivity to the world around us. For me, it’s an important base for starting creative work.

Which person in fashion do you most admire, and why?
I would start with a certain six people! I really don’t have a favourite one. The group of favourite designers is connected by their being brave – they follow their own path. I love designers who can combine personal experience with a universal, poetic language.

What can younger designers express through fashion that designers from an older generation cannot?
There is this magic in doing something for the first time. It is unknown and scary, and it rarely works out the way you imagined it would. I don’t believe there is something that divides designers by their age; it’s rather the experience they’ve gathered. Maybe the magic of the ‘first time’ is not dependent on age.

Where do you see yourself professionally in five years’ time?
I really like challenges, contrasts and healthy conflicts. It brings me joy and pushes me forward. I find beauty in places where there is an appreciation of the need for grounding, and a focus on slowing down the system.

Models: Ashton Lang, Frederik Lovric, Chen Xuewen, Laura Meier Hagested, Armance Lagorce. Styling: Dirk Van Saene. Make-up: Inge Grognard. Photography assistants: Roën Lommelen and Vadim Celis. Coordination: Heidi Pille, Yvonne Dekock, Manon Kindig, Marisa Leipert, Mia Price.



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Photograph by Mark Borthwick

The Runway Questionnaire: Eliza Douglas

By Loïc Prigent

What's the most precious fashion garment you own?
Demna once gave me a T-shirt with my name on it; he'd embroidered it himself, so it feels especially meaningful.

What is special about haute couture?
The uniqueness of each piece and that it is made for a specific person – especially in light of today's culture of obscene amounts of mass-produced garments. It also feels more about artistry and not as directly profit driven.

Who is your fashion heroine?
It's hard to choose just one! Kembra Pfahler, Sharon Niesp and Martina Tiefenthaler come to mind.

How did you master your runway walk?
I don't feel like I mastered anything. During my first meeting with Demna he said, 'Just walk like you're walking down the street' – so that's what I do. It's mostly about exuding strength and not trying too hard. I had a very different experience when I modelled in the early 2000s: I was always told I wasn't walking well, and I was even given lessons with J. Alexander, who I think didn't have much hope for me.

What is it like to be a haute-couture model?
It wasn't wildly different to being a ready-to-wear model; there were just more fittings. But being part of Demna's first-ever couture show was especially exciting; he made a transcendentally mind-blowing collection. Walking in it was different as there was no music and it took place in a simple, classical setting. Usually the Balenciaga runway is overflowing with sonic and visual stimuli, so there was a different quality to the way I felt present.

How did you meet Demna?
We first met in 2016 when he was casting his debut Balenciaga runway show. I was in art school at the time and hadn't modelled for many years. When I opened Demna's first Balenciaga show, I had no idea I was beginning this journey that would last for all these years, which continually inspires me and has led to so many nice relationships.

What is your first high-fashion childhood memory?
I grew up in New York City and when I was 12 I was approached by a model-agency scout. That's when I was first exposed to fashion. I was eventually sent to Helmut Lang and did his shows a few times. The first time I visited his old atelier on Greene Street was my first experience in high fashion. I went there straight from high-school basketball practice and was still wearing my uniform.

What was it like to see clones of yourself walking that virtual Balenciaga runway?
It was fun – I was honoured to be cloned!

What does Balenciaga stand for?
For me, after all these years, it is a home away from home. I feel accepted and embraced by it. I also love the clothes so much; it provokes a lot of material desire in me!

What are you proudest of?
I feel proud and mostly just lucky that I was able to stop drinking alcohol and doing drugs 13 years ago. It probably saved my life.

GIVENCHY

LOUIS VUITTON